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Tangled landscapes: Essays from wildness memory and the unbroken sky

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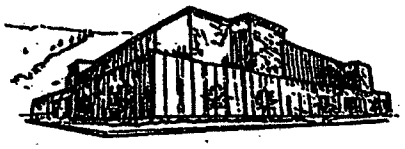

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Tangled Landscapes:

Essays from Wildness, Memory, and the Unbroken Sky

By

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Tangled Landscapes: Essays from Wildness, Memory and the Unbroken Sky

Director: Phil Condon P.C.

A series of nine personal essays and nine poems/vignettes were written to explore the individual's development of an environmental ethic, and also to address broader questions: How do people develop an environmental ethic? What types of experiences shape the decisions that people make when interacting with or upon the environment? How are people affected emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically by their experiences in the natural world? Themes include outdoor adventure or extreme recreation, human-animal interaction and gardening. The primary settings for the essays are Vermont, Eastern Africa and Montana. The essays focus on issues of loss, the impact of natural events, such as wildfire, and on the navigation of relationships through the lens of external and internal wildernesses or landscapes.

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Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko writes about the significance of collective memory in the Pueblo culture and how it contains the complete history of her people and important strategies for survival. She says that through our stories, we hear who we are. The remembering and retelling of her people's stories is a communal process.

As a child, I craved the bits and pieces of stories that my parents shared about our Italian and English Ancestors, but, like many American children, I did not have an experience of collective story sharing. I don't remember whole stories of my culture or have them to tell. As I grow older I reflect on this often and feel like I have had more of an experience of non-culture, and uprootedness.

Writing these essays has been a way of seeking collective stories, finding a memory of community and a way to ground myself in a landscape. The stories I have found come from the natural world. I write them because it helps me to make sense out of this world and all of the challenges, relationships and mysteries that go with it. And in writing I find a desire to help others interpret, survive and embrace their experiences. I cannot write what I do not know, but I can write about not knowing through a lens of what I have come to believe in. That lens is the value of the natural environment to the health and quality of this life that we share.

This body of work is a reflection of my desire to find a role in helping to write a new collective story, one that acknowledges and addresses our impact on the environment, as well as our connection to it. A story that tells of health and evolution. A story that ties us together.

How do people develop a land ethic or morality? What experiences shape the decisions that people make when interacting with or upon the environment? How are we affected emotionally, spiritually and psychologically by our experiences in the natural world? These are the questions that I am exploring, because I believe that if we can shed light on the answers, we may gain a better understanding of each other's motives in the environment. That may be a place to begin creating the new story, one that we can share, instead of scattering fragments of our separate memories and leaving a fractured and damaged environment in our wake.

In America, the stories that we possess often come from somewhere other than where we live. We don't carry our ancestors with us necessarily, because many of them lived in foreign lands. What ties us together? What is our foundation for a collective memory? The soil that we live on. The landscapes around and within us. By exploring these questions, I am trying to find a way for us to recognize the earth in our histories and each other. These essays address the questions on a personal level, focused primarily on three main themes in my life: Outdoor and extreme recreation, gardening and interaction with animals. The settings include Vermont, Africa and Montana. There are nine essays total, interwoven with nine poems and vignettes.

Throughout this process of writing, I have often questioned the significance of these stories. Why is my life so important? Why do my stories matter? But what I realize is that I have to write these stories first, before I can help other people share their stories. You have to learn *how* to tell a story and telling your own is the most honest place to start. I consider this thesis a beginning. Yes, it is a goal achieved, but still a place of initiation.

Totem Hunt I

There are treasures of knowing that have always been with me, like the still breath of a golden Savannah, the glacial stare of a sled dog, the white crests of the Rocky Mountains and the shocking brightness of carrots pulled from soil. To these, I add an affinity for color and trembling. I am six, I am seventeen. I am twenty, now almost thirty. It is Halloween and while my friends ponder the possibilities of pretend, I know only as always that I will wear wings.

Reflections in the Wild Eye

"Perhaps the wildness we fear is the pause between
our own heartbeats, the silent space that says we
live only by grace. Wilderness lives by this same grace.
Wild mercy is in our hands." -Terry Tempest Williams

I am six. It is summer in the pastoral mountains of Vermont, and the warm breeze tousles my hair as I push open the red screen door and run out onto the porch. Slam! The door closes behind me, and I hear my mother's voice, "Danielle Mary, put your shoes on before you go tromping into the woods!" I look down at my dirty bare feet and then across the street at my sisters, who are already too far ahead of me. "Hey you guys, wait for me," I call to them in my Minnie Mouse voice, believing once again that they will listen. I jump off of the porch stairs and onto our marble sidewalk, landing as usual, on all fours. Pebbles dig into my palms. I run after my sisters, up the deadend and into the woods, breathless, when I catch up to them at creek side. There they already have the bucket filled with water and one crayfish scurrying in circles at the bottom of it. The critter's crimson black shell stands bright against the white barren surface of the bucket, and one large claw grabs at nothing in the water.

The tamed and subdued mountains of Vermont cradle me as I grow. I spend long afternoons braiding daisies and black-eyed susans into my corn-silk fine hair. I make crowns out of pine branches, hunt frogs and crawfish in the streams, and paint my face with earth. I play at wildness in this cozy landscape, where there is enough space to explore and plenty of freedom to roam the woods.

As I look back on it now, I realize that wildness was my answer to a less than comfortable home life, and the freedom of it was a gift from my mother. She knew that

home was too confining, under the shadow of a father diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Home was too unpredictable. The woods stayed the same.

As a child, I thought that the ancient mountains of Vermont were wilderness. Perhaps because I could not separate wilderness from freedom. I understood wilderness as a place unfettered by the rules of society, where I could commune with all the creatures of the world and my imagination. We spoke one language, and understanding came from a voice deep within us. That was freedom and wildness.

What I see now is that Vermont held an essence of wildness, but no true wilderness, for most every square inch of it has been tinkered with or altered in some way, by human hands. The wilderness that lived in it was equally inside of me, the pure uninhibited child, and it was enough. My innocence remained untouched in that place, unaltered by human life. No hands could reach me there. It was that freedom that allowed me to see worlds beyond the confines of a turbulent household. My mother saw a window, and she let me climb out of it.

When does wildness enter you? Or is it always there and you merely come to understand it? When I wasn't escaping in the woods, I was escaping in my dreams. In them, I watched lions and elephants, while the wind hushed across the Savannah and the prickle of acacia thorns ravaged my bare tough feet. I gathered plants for food and medicine, and I smelled the rain heavy on the breeze. I often dreamed of a blue eyed wolf, by my side, my hand resting on his back, while we looked out over grasslands. I know that wildness was within me as a child, but is it in everyone?

The dreams ultimately carried me away from Vermont. I have abandoned it. I left that home for the dream of a wilder one and still take for granted that it will be the

same when I go back in two or twenty years. I miss it in the fall when I crave the crisp and shocking colors that transformed me into winter each year. But the beginning of wildness still lives there and has grown within me.

* *

I am twenty, scrambling my way out of the depths of a depression so severe that I have imagined countless ways to take my own life. I step off the plane and am struck by the heat of the midnight air. It tickles my nose with familiar but new scents, and it places me in a dreamlike state of reverie. The African moon hangs across the horizon from me. White gold, full, bright and wild. I have never seen the moon so large. I cannot believe it is the same moon that has illuminated my dreams throughout my life. Imposter.

The entire four months that I am in Africa, this moon calls to me, "Stay awake, no need to dream." The musical voices of the Kenyans surround me, and I feel a rhythm in my feet like never before. The earth is teaching me how to move. I am home. Suddenly, I possess a language for all of the dreams within me. I do not fight my own thoughts. I no longer stifle my urges to speak or sing, laugh or question. I feel right in this place. The memories that I have known all my life with no explainable origin finally make sense. I sit on a crater's edge and watch the cone of the volcano erupt. No fear. I watch as a young bull elephant prances and snorts, just feet away, threatening to charge. No fear. I live wildness, and I am more alive than ever. I find a force within me that won't let me sleep. I lay on the sand, hot silver sand, with my arms stretched over my head, sifting grains through my fingers, and my eyes trained on the sky. The white light of the moon paints a shadow across my face, and I feel entirely alone yet completely part of something. Loneliness becomes solitude, and I don't care if I live or die, as long as that

moment lives forever. A thing that feels older than my memory is awakened within me, and at last, the motions of my own body are familiar.

How do we keep wildness within us? How do we navigate the wilderness of our souls?

I return from Africa with wings, but as months pass, I lose the language somewhere. I am consumed with an aching for the dreams of wildness realized again. I thirst for rhythm and a raucous moon.

* *

It began with loneliness. I no longer found things in common with friends or lovers. My mother heard it in my voice and listened to the spaces between my words. She sought out a remedy for it by literally filling my places of emptiness, and hers. She filled the silence with her phone calls. She reminded me that there was another day beyond this one, and told me it would be better. She told me that I needed another husky and that she would help me if I got one. Perhaps she saw the spaces as windows, tiny windows shedding light on paths into the future. Perhaps my mother saw the windows open for both of us. Perhaps she sensed the power of what was to come by giving substance to those places, and being a wise woman, she called it out.

The blue eyed wolf materialized. Out of perfect timing, a kind musher and my mother's intuition, I become heir to an eight month old Siberian Husky. Pure white, long-legged, wildness embodied. Nakuru, by my side. I named him for Africa, a Maa word meaning "swirling dust". Nakuru, guardian and kindred spirit. I loved him before I understood him. Does it take understanding to love wildness?

We spend the winter in Vermont with my mother. Yet we are restless, Nakuru and I. He chews through the back door. I date three men at once. He eats my mother's shoes. I take a course in wilderness medicine. We wallow in the excessive snow of that particular season and wait for spring and the time for moving to come. When it finally does, we pack up the truck and head west.

On the road, people avoid approaching the truck, because they believe that Nakuru is a wolf. I don't mind so much, and it pleases my mother, who is back home worrying about me. The magic in him slowly reveals itself as I watch people respond to him. In China Town of San Francisco we walk down the street, and people gasp as we pass, leaping out of our path and almost into the path of moving vehicles. I giggle to myself, knowing that he wouldn't hurt anyone, but that he has some sort of power over people. As I learn Nakuru, I realize that he and I are walking a fine line. His greatest joy in life is running, preferably after something. Too much of the time, his joy is my stress and a risk to his well being because it is misunderstood by others. He bails on me frequently, when we are hiking, to chase deer or squirrels, anything that will run. I worry that he won't come back, shot by a hunter that considers him competition or hit by a car. We learn to compromise. We exercise everyday. Some days, if we are near roads or known wildlife areas, he walks tied to me, the leash hooked around my waist like an umbilical cord. He pulls me along, and we find a rhythm together. Other days, I listen to my gut and let him run free, amused by his gracefulness as he leaps over fallen trees, or bounds through the snow.

Eventually, we settle in Big Sky, Montana. After visiting a friend there, I am drawn to it. The landscape is a cross between Vermont and Africa, the security of the

mountains mixed with vast open spaces and a lot of sky. Sky that tells the story of seasons passing. Sky that shatters into infinite prisms when night comes. This place fits the in-between of my life, giving us a home to dwell in, until we figure out what is next.

We settle and find a routine that suits us both. Many times, our balance is disrupted, but my heart tells me to keep him tied only when necessary, because there is nothing so perfect as an instinct fulfilled. He stays tied to the open back of my pickup when I am working or skiing on the hill. The rest of the time, we are out, seeking, breathing, colliding with and loving wildness. I learn to read his moods and know when he may run off. He shows it in his posture and attentiveness. If he looks at me when I speak, he will most likely listen and stay close. If only one ear is trained in my direction, my "authority" is dismissed. I never find myself comfortable with it, but I love him for it just the same.

* *

One day in February, the cold afternoon turns our breath to ghosts and carries it into the clear bluebird sky. The fresh layer of snow slides and spins in wisps against the base layer. Everywhere there is twinkling, sparkling, like a place in my mind littered with jewels and fairy dust. We skin up the drainage, our sights on a jagged ridgeline, glowing and shadowed by the sun. As we ski past tree line, Nakuru's nose lifts to the air, and he turns his head suddenly to the east, giant ears pricked and tail waving like a flag. In my breathless voice I call "Nakuru, come!" I can see he is already gone. He glances sidelong at me, twinkling blue eyes flashing in the light. And he is off, long legs stretching in bounds above the snow. Chasing the scent: elk, moose, squirrel. No point in trying to follow, even on skis I am no match for him in predatory mode.

It is fifteen below zero. It does not occur to me that we may be foolish for being out in this. Nakuru returns to us, and we reach the ridgeline at about four p.m. My fingers are numb, my nose hurts. I stand, shifting from foot to foot, refusing to take my pack off, body stiff with shivers. Too cold. Nakuru holds one paw off the snow at a time. As the wind picks up, he begins to dig, pushing snow between his legs and out. He is trying to den down. He is cold, and so am I, but I can't seem to make myself move. Why won't I move? As I watch him, I am overcome with a grief and emptiness, a longing for my childhood freedoms. I wonder where my instinct has gone. He reminds me that it is somewhere within me. I hand him a biscuit and share a cookie, before dropping off the ridge and skiing as fast as I can to the car, with Nakuru at my heels, too tired to break his own trail.

* *

Another winter night and it is four a.m. I wake with a start. Terror climbs up my spine. The calls are just outside my window. Loud, shrill, unearthly. Yip. Yip. Howl. Battle cry, solemn cry. Nakuru paces at the front door. He finds me awake and nudges at my hands, whining, unsettled, sleepless. The coyotes are calling. He wants to go. I remember the coyote that followed me home one night, just a few feet from my ankles. I turned to it and said, "Coyote, what are you doing?" It ducked into the roadside grass and skulked away. I was scared and exhilarated by it. Tonight however, I only crave shelter and know that Nakuru would be gone if I opened the door.

We have lived in Big Sky for three years together. In that time, Nakuru has accompanied me on hikes all over southern Montana, fallen from a twenty foot waterfall and been quilled by a porcupine (90 quills in his snout). On more than one occasion, he

has completely spooked my neighbor, by slipping out of his harness and suddenly *appearing* just behind Marshall, as he goes about the business of painting, mowing, shoveling and scrubbing. It is moments like these that have earned Nakuru his nicknames. *Mr. Lightfoot* can get out of anything. He appears and disappears on a whim. Nakuru. *Ku. Kudini.* He has made a profession out of antagonizing moose and hence stirring up the most primal terror within myself and any other hapless souls that are with us at the time. Perhaps the worst was when he barked and grumbled at a stocky bull moose until pissing it off so thoroughly that it charged right through our campsite, stepping over my friend Kevin, who was sleeping on the ground. Kevin curled into a small ball inside his sleeping bag, his eyes meeting mine in wide spherical panic, just before ducking his head under his arms. The moose stepped over him in total disregard and proceeded to browse on the willows next to Kevin's pillow. Kevin lay perfectly still until the bull charged Ku again and nearly toppled our tent.

Those who don't know my name, surely know me by my dog. I am deemed "white dog girl" because we are seen walking every day and everywhere in Big Sky. My friends joke about how dogs and their owners really do look alike. We are both fair-skinned, blue-eyed and long-legged. I teach him how to say, "I love you," in his best husky grumble, and he teaches me how to be silent when I walk through the woods. We learn the temperament and voice of Montana wildness together.

But he is gifted in ways I have yet to understand: When I feel the loneliness of loving someone who doesn't even love himself set in, Nakuru forces me to fill the space. He stands by my side through the slow unveiling of heartbreak. He guides me into the

beauty and challenge of claiming a new home. It is not just that he is by my side in these moments, it is that he is part of what makes these moments into memories.

In spring of 1999, I plan a trip to Florida to visit my father. In the two weeks before that trip, Nakuru is unusually attentive to me, which is totally out of character for a husky, even a husky as gregarious as he is. He wants to be inside with me when I am home. He often rests his head between my knees, leaning into my legs.

The day that I leave, Mike comes to pick him and my truck (portable doghouse) up. I had hoped that Mike would arrive after I depart, so that I don't have to watch Ku go away, but away he goes. I have left Nakuru in the care of my close friends and his companion Cairo, their husky.

Two days into the trip, we pile on a boat and motor out into the Everglades. An Osprey snacks on a fish in a dead tree. Another leads us out to sea. We scan the waters looking for dolphins and manatees.

Mike loads the dogs into the truck and drives them across the highway to the Indian Creek Trailhead, just outside of Big Sky. He scans the hillside for elk, moose and deer before letting the dogs out.

We spend an hour or so cruising the waters. No sign of marine mammals. But I feel them. I need to see them. We are about to turn around, and I see a dark shape jump not far away. Dolphins! We head in their direction and they head in ours. They begin to chase the boat and play in the wake. Their watchful eyes smile as they push through the water. They shine.

Mike drops the tailgate and lets the dogs out. He calls to them and they start working their way up the trail, into the woods, away from the canyon highway. The dogs catch a scent and veer off to the left across the meadow, parallel to the road.

I take pictures of the dolphins and wish that we could run our hands along their sleek and taut bodies. Gray blue muscle, shine.

Nakuru and Cairo split off from each other, Cairo heading back towards Mike and the woods, Nakuru running down to the road where the neighbor's dogs are barking.

In my mind I speak to the dolphins. I ask them if there is anything more beautiful than water on their skin. One of them leaps out of the water and spins in the air.

Nakuru runs into the highway, focused on the dogs on the other side. He does not hear the truck, nor does he feel it hit him. He stands up and stumbles to the other side, down the embankment, where he falls to his side, and leaves this world I know.

The dolphin lands with a smack in the water and soaks my arms and chest. I can feel the ocean thundering in my bones.

* *

I often wonder what it would have been like if I had been with him when he died. I would have knelt over his body and soaked his downy white fur with my tears. I would have cursed myself for not having tied him up. I would have cursed the highway and all of human invention.

Then I think about the things that I learned from him. He was chasing instinct when he died. And I was, too. Being out in the woods with him brought me back to the wildness that I craved. We shared a delicate balance that taught me something else about love. It wasn't a matter of control. It was a matter of simply listening, trusting and

letting go. Learning his wildness tested my own limits. I feel the same way about wilderness. But unlike Nakuru, if wilderness dies, there is no tangible body to grieve over. It is simply gone and forgotten by those who could have protected it.

Ironically, Nakuru and I never spent time together in the deep wilderness of Montana, because law prevented us from doing so, but in knowing him, I learned to be more comfortable in the undefined spaces of that wilderness.

* *

It is two months ago. I am flipping through a stack of mail and come across a postcard from Alaska. Crisp white mountains stand bold and stark against a deep blue sky. The foreground is a pillow of glaring white snow. The only things that break its monotony are the silhouettes of huskies pulling a sled and rider. Their wolfly shapes strain against the invisible line that holds them to each other. Their heads are set low and straight, their tails standing proud, like the plumes of peacocks. I flip the card and read "I love you my beautiful friend. Thoughts of you when I hear the sled dogs howl." The writer of the card is a dear friend of mine, a park ranger in Denali, and before that, Glacier. She has brought back to me, in one image and just a few words, all the things that mean freedom to me. Wild places and spirit dogs.

I glance around my little urban apartment and feel trapped. The windows are too small. My plants crowd them for light, air, breath. My cushy red chair is no longer inviting. The reds and oranges of my sleeping room are too warm with restlessness so present within me. All of my photos call me away from this place, to the mountains where wild flowers rule and I can go whichever way I please.

Now I live four and a half hours north and west, in Missoula, Montana. This is a little liberal city, unlike any other in the state. It is the most populated place that I have lived in but most would call it a little big town, not a city. Missoula is the Garden City, built in a valley that at one time was the bottom of a glacial lake and named for a Salish word meaning "near the chilling waters." I came here to exercise my concern for our environment and to pursue my desire to protect it. In doing so, I have put myself as far away from wilderness as I have ever been. I no longer have a vehicle, and I live in town. Just getting into woods is difficult, and I am short on time these days. I am lonely again and crave wildness more than ever.

I laugh at the irony of my life when I remember that I live in a state full of its own irony. Montana is home to millions of acres of wilderness. True designated wilderness. It is also home to the largest environmental disaster area in the nation. There are still six million acres of land yet to be designated for anything. I hope for them to one day be called wilderness, but I realize that I must do more than hope. Myself and a few friends have started exploring some wildland areas around us. We want to hear the Great Burn be named Wilderness. We want to hear Rock Creek be named Wilderness. Beehive Wilderness. Windy Pass Wilderness. There is a chant traveling through us, an electric, circular, wind-swept, snow-blessed chant that begins and ends with the word Wilderness. These names are not complete, the mantra is not complete without Wilderness. We want to make it happen as citizens, to prove that we can, to maintain our belief in hope.

I have shaped my life with the lines and contours that allow me to live on the edge of wilderness. I have only found true joy tangled up with it, or merely in the knowledge

that it is there. Something that still holds the inscrutable and an element of space for instinct. I have claimed my life in Montana and want to protect its wild places. Montana was named the Treasure State, perhaps its time to redefine treasure as wilderness.

I wonder, if wildness is something that lives within you, what happens to it when you age, and human hands alter parts of your internal landscape, too? I did not know that my dreams of Africa and blue-eyed wolves would still own me. I look back on my life and see that my relationship with wildness holds as much significance as the powerful human relationships in my life. It is yet another lover, sister, parent, guardian, soul mate and spirit, subject to all the nuances of life: the storms, the still water, the seasonal whims. Wildness taught me how to navigate my internal wilderness, by testing my boundaries, teaching me to listen and to relinquish control. In turn I came to love and value wilderness. Now, in our time for making history, we have come to a place where wilderness is some form of other. Separate from us, a mythical place.

* *

Today I have borrowed a friend's car, loaded the dogs up and stolen away, just to the other side of town. We need to get out. Slam! I shut the door, and the dogs are off running full speed, biting at each other's ruff and snarling ever so ferociously. It is a crisp autumn day, when rare sunshine sets everything ablaze. I squint and make the meadow into Monet's haystacks.

As I walk, I stretch my arms and feel the air push through my fingers. We climb up into the meadows swiftly, and then I hear the breeze whisper, "Stop, it is time to dream." I plop down in the dry earth and take a breath. Mountains surround me, brushed white where they meet the sky. Close your eyes. Inhale the day. Open your eyes, the

afternoon has fallen silent. This silence that still exists alongside sounds, raw basic sounds.

A red-tail calls high above me. He calls to the part of me that knows him without seeing. The dogs pounce in the sagebrush, snorting as they bury their muzzles into a burrow. I hear the crisp staccato of a dragonfly on the wing.

This moment is enough, for now. The words of a Pokot blessing enter my head and sit there, like seagulls riding a swell.

> The stars are hearing, the earth is hearing, The people
> are hearing all is well, good, sweet.....Then laugh,
> laugh, laugh.

Can we learn our own wilderness and begin to listen to each other? I don't mean words. I mean the pulse that is ever present but often not heard unless we stop and lose ourselves in natural spaces and wild places. If we stop injuring each other and start listening, then perhaps the wilderness within us will be more intact and we will remember to protect its source.

Without a place to go and rejuvenate, or explore, we are empty. We may lose our ability to understand or recognize that part of ourselves. Perhaps some of us never had it. We are gnawing away at our external wilderness, and soon there may be nothing left but what is within us. Will we turn on ourselves and devour our own souls? Or will we find hints of wilderness in tiny moments, clues that could rescue us? The sound of water hitting a thirsty earth. The tartness of apples on the lips of a lover. The way clouds roll and tumble across the sky. How light reflects off of a wet river stone and ignites the imagination. Tiny glistening stones, shifting perspectives, slicing windows in our

consciousness. Windows that squeak as we take a moist finger and polish away a little circle of viewing, revealing another place where wildness still lives and words sometimes let instinct speak for itself.

Totem Hunt II

Now I know where ladybugs go in winter

But where do butterflies go in a storm?

Leaves twist as the maple's limbs

Dip and Bob

In the wind

Am I clinging to their underbellies

Watching the sky expand and swell

With sudden depth and washing?

Am I alone?

Ash and Waking

"It's like snow, it's snowing ash," Kevin said as I walked into work. True, black and gray flakes fell and smudged the sidewalk under my bike tires. The fire blew up that day and residents of O'Brien Creek were evacuated from their homes. That fire, the Black Mountain Fire, was the biggest one burning, but not the only one burning in the forests surrounding Missoula. It seemed like the arid climate of western Montana was slowly turning into a high desert and this summer, record high temperatures and little moisture turned us into one big living tinderbox. Over forty fires burned around us, one fire alone blackening over 21,000 acres. We could not see the mountains, not even an outline. The only indication of nature carrying on around us was the Clark Fork River curving through downtown. It still moved, flowed through all the stagnant smoke, and reminded us that this wouldn't last forever.

"It's like living near a volcano!" I exclaimed, quite thrilled by the notion, a notion that I had come to love when I lived in Africa.

"What is wrong with you two? This isn't fun," snapped the coffee lady.

Kevin and I both shot each other looks and snickered. He whispered, "I think it's kinda cool."

I think it's about living in Montana. We live in the woods. We live closer to wilderness than most people do in this country. Of course I am concerned about the well being of the people that I share this place with. No, the smoke and heat is not appealing; it is confining, exhausting, and pervades every aspect of life in Missoula, right now. Right now, the sunsets are haunting. "It looks like those paintings they do in Japan," my boyfriend blurts out. The moon is an unnatural and passionate shade of orange. The smoke raises this intensity among us, an explosive spark of anger, fear, lust and intrigue.

Things we cannot control often strip us down. We can love it or let it wreck us. Either way, the forest will show us resurrection if we remember that it is the forest that brought many of us here in the first place. It shelters us, quenches our thirst, gives us breath. People in Florida have hurricanes. Californians, earthquakes. Montanans, wildfire. And in Africa, they have volcanoes.

* *

In September of 1994, I went to Tanzania as part of the Kenya semester abroad. There I spent two weeks with twenty-seven other students and several native guides. We explored the land and patterns of life with its people. The culmination of that journey was a climb to the top of an active volcano. We would begin in the darkness at four in the morning so that we would be back at camp and in the rare shade of acacia trees before the hottest hours of the day.

In the northwestern area of Tanzania, this ancient volcano slumbers upon the sandy expanse that stretches and fans out to meet the horizon. It is a polyp on an often-featureless run of land called The Great African Rift Valley, a volcano thrust up by the churning deep within an elaborate system, an expression of geologic time and an indication of the earthen brew that simmers within the world that we inhabit. Occasionally, it will sputter and groan, spewing lava onto the sands 7,000 feet below. The creeping vegetation and the creatures that have chosen to live at its flanks will be reminded of the force that lies beneath as they succumb to the heat of the core pouring down upon them. The Maasai people that live in and know this area of land in the rift valley have come to call her, "Ol Donyo Lengai," the mountain of God. God lives up there, they say, and that is where they send their prayers.

On the days before that climb, I tossed what little knowledge I had about earth science around in my head. I remembered the unit that we did on geography in fifth grade, the first time I heard the term, "continental drift." We were given a map to look at that showed us how the continents used to fit perfectly together, like Legos. I also remembered being told that there were plates deep within the planet, even under the oceans. The only image I could ever conjure up was a bunch of my mom's corningware buried under the soil in our backyard in Vermont, like all the fragments of dinnerware that my father and I found around the foundations of homes that he remodeled.

My thoughts told me that I was camping on the floor of the African Rift Valley, a place studied extensively by geologists because it provides some kind of clue as to what occurs deep within the earth. They believe that it is where the next continental split will occur. Those plates are pulling apart and one day the valley will fill with the waters of the sea. Africa will break apart. Earthquakes and volcanoes (of which Africa has many) are an expression of the inner turbulence that will cause this. Volcanoes suck basalt lava up through the earth's upper most layer of rock, the crust. They do so with phenomenal force, barely comprehensible to humans, but this is how we know that there is something more down there.

No matter how many little facts I knew and what stories I had heard about the climb, no matter how hard I tried to picture climbing for six hours at a forty-five degree angle on loose sand and gravel, there was no way I could have understood what the implications were until I was scrambling up the side of the mountain.

I couldn't sleep on the eve of our climb. I lay sluggishly on my sleeping bag, sticky with sweat from the heat of the dark gray sand. The smothering air made me wish that I didn't have to conceal my flesh. I wasn't experiencing sleeplessness, but wakefulness. Sleeplessness was something that I had come to know intimately during the two years previous to that time. I had once been in a frame of mind where I could not find value in who I was, where I spent weeks at a time motionless on a couch thinking only about how I could end my life. It was in the dead of winter, in a place far from home. My thoughts took my body to the middle of a snow-ridden field and left it there, to be frozen, for that was better than the immobility of my depression. I could not hope to believe in myself, and in the pain of that desperation, sleeplessness emerged. My sleep lacked peace of any kind, so I continued to seek death, but death would not have given me what I desired.

Eventually, I learned to overcome those feelings, but it took forcing myself to get up and move. Sleeplessness slowly began to loosen its grip on me. Finally, in walking through the wild of Tanzania, I found myself awake. I could feel the pulse in my feet, thumping with each step. I could *feel* something. Yet, that night, while lying on my back, staring at the river of stars and the waning moon, I had never felt more drawn to the sky. I was indignant that the moon would not give us her full brightness to light the way up the mountain, but still held my eyes, wide and far from sleep.

I grew up in Vermont, born into the cradling mountains. My home had a soft wilderness to it, but Africa was a wildness in itself, more aged and rooted than anything I had ever conceived. Visions of endless desert and awesome creatures had only teased me with a taste of what one might discover where the earliest of humans had walked before.

We were going to be climbing a volcano that had spewed ash onto the land 35 miles southwest of it, preserving footprints of man for two million years in the shelter of Olduvai Gorge. The idea of being so close to that big African sky and simultaneously gazing down into depths 30 miles below the surface of the earth consumed me. That is why the hot sand and twinkling stars did not lull me to sleep. I was engrossed in the possibility of uncovering some little piece of creation, and making it my own.

When the voices came out of the night calling us to rise, I was up searching for some kind of chill in the hot soupy breeze. Our group emerged into the darkness with cautious whispers lingering on our lips. Slowly, we made our way onto the two lorries and started the hour-long drive to the foot of the mountain. The drive through the desert, slow and languid, only reinforced the notion that this experience could be nothing more than a dream. I sat in an outer seat and gazed out at Lengai, always in sight. I felt questions rise between us. The band of black night and dangling stars that twirled around the mountain's form enhanced a crown of milky white clouds. Not even the cool wind could distract me, consumed by all of my senses. I was already entangled in the climb.

We arrived finally and stretched, breathed, pondered quietly what was before us. Even in the darkness, Lengai was embossed in gold from the tall, stiff grasses that grew along its haunches. I kept searching in the silhouettes around me for something familiar, but there was nothing I could have known.

We began the climb, forming a line that meandered up the slopes along a blind path. The stars were bright and I did not need to use my headlamp. At first, we were clustered together and then we steadily separated. The angle of the slope gradually became more exaggerated and my body began to conspire with my mind. The two

became one force behind the cadence of my breath, creating my own pace, upwards. There was a fresh energy and hunger inside of me, like my body was trying to forget the stiffness it once acquired, when I curled up to avoid challenge and fear. There was not much else to do in the dark but become fully engaged in each and every step. Darkness was then a mystery I wanted to walk through, no longer a place for hiding.

With the dawn, shadows became solid. Below me the foothills stretched out like fingers across the valley, as though Lengai was pressing a palm firmly against its surface. The unyielding grasp seemed to have sent millions of cracks slithering out across the land. I was gazing into craters and clouds that hovered around me, broken by the reflective, succulent pale blue of soda ash lakes. They looked as thin as puddles and they did not connect to the earth, but rested on top of it. I felt a twinge of fear surge through me, as all the space seemed so incomprehensible, but then I opened my mouth for a breath, and leaned into the air. I wanted more. Here, I paused in the moment that light became more than creator of shadows.

Frustration leapt up from each step, for my body was exhausted and the downward draw of the slope pulled me back. The sinking sand beneath my feet undermined my progress, for it cut the length of my already small steps in half. Still, determination. The top was high above us.

I was anxious to move on. I stumbled upwards through loose, sometimes sharp rock. My focus was so intense that I did not notice the massive drop off that formed alongside of me, until I was upon it. It was a vein in the mountain that forced our path to curve off to the right. Others in my group were at that place with me and we curiously crept up to the edge of the cliff to see how far we would fall and if there was rock below.

I imagined myself falling, but not dying. I just imagined the wind on my belly. We all wanted to peer down into the canyon, for it wasn't opening freely to us, like the valley. What was it concealing? None of us dared to get too close though; the wind was strong and whimsical. We could tell by the way the clouds came gusting up over the edge. They were so swift and elegant in their motion that they moved through our bodies, tingling, chased by the wind, breaking into the open air.

We were close to the three-quarter mark then, and I could hear the voices of those who were resting there at the lunch spot. As I continued, I would grab the rocks before me, thinking that they were connected to the sand, but they would submit to my hand, surrender, taunting me with their inconsistency. I could do nothing but drop them down and yell to those below me as they tumbled away. Nothing was certain, and I began to cling to each step, cautiously picking my way up, hoping that I would not hurt those following me with the repercussions of my climb. Hoping that the uncertainty would not stop me in my tracks. There was no telling if the rocks would crumble in my hands or cut my fingers with a jagged edge. My feet and hands became engrossed in the slope of the mountain and my eyes explored only its skin. I could hear nothing but the voices of my companions.

Finally, I was hunkered down between some rocks with my group. We giggled, ate sandwiches and guzzled water. It was chilly there, even though the land appeared to be warm. With the vision before me, I imagined myself a tiny speck in the scheme of life, reflected somewhere in the mirror of the lake below.

After a time, I stood up and walked around the rocks we were resting between. Other climbers were lounging on top of those rocks, and I slowly wandered away from

them to pick up the trail to the top. I wanted to see what the rest of the climb would be like. My back was to the rift valley. Before me was a land bridge, a wide path with absolutely no earth on either side of it. It appeared to be swaying in the breeze as I stared at it. Voices behind me rose, "We have to cross that?!" But it didn't concern me. What concerned me was the way in which the mountain shot straight up at the end of it. It was a wall of swirly, marble-like black and white dirt, split up by flat rock. I could not conceive of the path we would take. No expectation lingered. Fear came, but fled just as suddenly. There was nothing but that left to climb.

People started to gather up, and I decided to take off with the first motivated group. We crossed the bridge in an unruly line and dropped forward onto the slope. What I thought looked like marble was volcanic ash and fallout, huge rivulets of it. We jumped across vertically from ridge to ridge and found a more solid path upwards. I was in the ash, the organs of the earth sifting through my fingers, invading my lungs. Softness like I never felt, raw silken earth.

In a few full moments, I came up over a hump and the terrain became more concrete. My energy lifted as I gazed upon the final stretch. There were shrubs growing there with tiny, sweet yellow flowers swarmed in bees. I could hear birds singing. My hands were raw, my Achilles' tendons sore. The green of those shrubs was haunting. There were whoops and hollers drifting down through the air, obscured by the racing clouds. I stood upright and jumped along a ridge to where the voices came clear and said, "We did it, you guys, we're here."

I was standing on the crater's edge. Behind us napped the rift valley, rocking to the waves of air. Below was the crater, a prehistoric blackened world, splotched in white.

There were three cone-like spires that came up from its floor. They looked like the mud drippings I used to make on the beach at Cape Cod when I dug way down and got the blackest, thickest, most sparkly sand I could find. The stench of sulfur toyed with my nostrils, as green fume-like smoke puffed up from the crater walls.

The blackest cone that stood farthest away from our spot on the crater's edge also blew smoke with a gusty burp. We watched it while we waited for everyone to come to the top, cheering them on between our mouthfuls of tomatoes or passion fruit and trail mix. Some of the group even went farther up on the highest side of the wall. They looked tiny, like ants, as they jumped up and down, waving their arms. Part of me wanted to join them, but for once I listened contentedly to myself, and I took a seat, alone.

In the midst of our giggling and cheering, another voice joined us, sudden, unexpected. A kind of rumbling began beneath our feet and, almost simultaneously, we heard the splashing of lava on the crater floor. The cone that had been teasing with its smoky indigestion had begun to erupt. Black shiny lava spilled over the top edge of the cone and down onto the crater bottom, like spilt molasses. It would flow and slowly come to a stop, retaining its form, wiggly but smooth. Our voices rose in excitement, fear, and confusion. Some turned and started retreating back down the mountain. Some shimmied down the side of the crater wall to get a closer look. Our guides were among that group. Our lead guide turned and shouted over his shoulder as he traversed across the crater floor to the edge of the lava flow, "There's no sense in running, if she decides to go, we'll go with her, eh?" He was the same man who had been climbing around

inside one of the cones on a previous expedition and just as he climbed out, it began to erupt.

I sat straddling the crater edge, my legs dangling on either side of the scratchy loose surface. My eyes were fixed on the lava as it flowed from depths unknown to me. My thoughts solidified with the lava, as it merged with the air. I could feel the coolness of the clouds caressing the back of my neck, lingering on my lower back, tempting me to shiver. Time was no longer present. It was as if the things that I knew only by the way they held me down came flowing out of that cone, releasing me from them. Things like fear, self-hatred, and loneliness were incinerated in those moments. A slow feeling finally surfaced, climbing up from the tips of my toes, throughout the ends of my windblown, gnarly hair. The prospect of death lay before me once again, but I had not sought it out. It came to me in peacefulness, genuine succulent peacefulness. I could embrace it, not like the death that I had come to before, in my terror of living. The journey had come full circle. Words, slight and liquid, entered my breath: "So be it, Salama Kabisa (peace completely)."

We were told later that day as we lounged in a stream, that Lengai was not prone to huge glowing avalanche eruptions that could consume the entire surrounding area. The last one that occurred was long before any people inhabited the land. Although some Maasai there have watched ash drift down from above, holding their palms up to catch the gray flakes and then smearing it beneath their fingers, darkening skin with ink from the mountain of God. We were also told that Lengai's lava is among the coolest possible lava emitted by volcanoes, even though it can still kill everything in its path. All of those things were irrelevant on top of that mountain.

What was shown to me was this: The forces that brought me to feel the slopes and contours of that glorious mountain had swarmed within me since conception, and I had come to acknowledge them with the caesurae of sleeplessness and every new awakened breath. This had been a journey through wakefulness. I had not come to conquer the mountain of God. I had come to know her and in turn, come to know myself. In accepting my humanness as a minute part of universe, I become larger. In that open river of submission, the currents of vitality flow, mysteries unfold, and there is living.

I could not have been anything but myself in the force of that eruption. I witnessed Lengai's power and found that I had and wanted more days on earth. In the path of wakefulness I came to know vitality. If I had been given death on that day, I would have remained awake and wild. This was my reassurance, as I sank into sleep that night, like water into thick dark soil.

This is still my reassurance each day, as I awake in smoke and ash.

Totem Hunt III

What if our culture celebrated totem animals like we celebrate excess and fantasy?

Learning to Dance

The first time you see a place, you don't think about how you will see it later on. You only think about how it compares to the other places that you know, the places that you have seen more than once. Sometimes, the memory of a first impression will stick to you, and when you mull over it years later, it will carry more weight and perhaps reveal that you ignored an intuition or held on too tightly to one tiny detail of one particular moment.

When I first moved to Missoula, Montana, in August of 2000, the smoke from surrounding wildfires had settled so thickly in the valley that people wore masks over their faces and no one could make out the outline of the mountains that surrounded us. I was so anxious to start my new life that I wasn't really bothered by the smoke. It was something different and that was all I wanted. Never mind that the surroundings seemed strange and unsettling. We drove to Missoula on Highway 90 through white clouds of smoke. Nothing was clear until you were upon it. An old homestead stood deserted roadside, the black spaces of its windows and doors, blacker against the smoke. We expected to see ghosts. Closer to the Garden City, helicopters dipped down to the river and scooped water, the wind from their propellers rocking the car as we passed. It appeared to be a tragic place, a romantic place, a different Montana than the one I knew.

Now it is August of 2003, and the fires are burning again. This time they are closer. This time the smoke bothers me. My throat hurts every morning, I can't get into the mountains, and I worry for the people who may lose their homes. Something about this blurred world reminds me what beginnings feel like and how they are inevitably tied to changes, changes which often shelter some sort of loss. Perhaps it's because the smoke last time marked a beginning, a very different beginning from my first impression

of Montana. I might have told you then, told you that you could go outside in this smoke and make it dance, by twisting at the waist and letting your arms swirl around you. But really, you can't make this smoke move, you have to learn to live with it and all the first impressions that encompass your mistakes, your dreams, and the things you do not know, but may someday learn.

* *

Dusk pushed down on the highway in April of 1996 when I left Bozeman and traveled south for my first trip into the Gallatin Canyon of western Montana. Earlier in the day we felt the first stirrings of spring, but now the road pulled me back into deep winter. Snow twisted in the beam of the headlights. The clouds were high, and the moon must have been close to full, because everything was covered in an eerie, skim milk sheen. The Gallatin River rolled along in blackness, the truck moving against its current. Snow draped itself over the boulders that crouched low in the riverbed. Light pounced off crests in the water and rippled downstream. My eyes strained to see around each bend in the road, and every shadow threatened to move and take the form of mule deer, moose, bighorn sheep, or mountain lion.

I eased my foot off the gas pedal when I noticed the crosses. They lined both sides of the road in irregular intervals, luminescent in the darkening of the night. Each represented a life that had been lost on that highway. If I had known then that I would someday be able to put, not just one, but six names to the death that frequented that valley, perhaps I would have turned my truck around and followed the river out of the canyon. But on that night, the motion of everything became a seduction, a dance with wildness that I just had to learn.

Individuals who were equally charmed by the Gallatin Valley populated the resort community of Big Sky. At 11,166 feet, Lone Peak is Big Sky's crown jewel, looming above the other mountains in the Madison range. Weather clings to its summit, often shrouding it from sight on an otherwise sunny day. Treeless ridgelines span out from each side of the peak like two massive arms ready to engulf the mountain village in their white embrace.

Skiers fuss and scramble over the opportunity to drop into The Big Couloir, a famous run, which originates to the North of the summit and carves its way down to a permanent snowfield. I never dug an edge into that place on the mountain although at times I aspired to. It was too visible, often too scary and in reality, the hype surrounding it was a turn-off, like a date that can't stop talking about how much money he makes. But I studied the mountain and learned that beneath the Couloir lies a glacier composed of cretaceous rock, mountain streams, and ice. Over time, the ice shifts and melts, rocks break and slough, and the glacier moves. Only those who ski it time and again might realize that they are in a place of seasonal and millennial shifting, a place where you can't rely on initial impressions or even a history of sharing. Only these people might gain a perspective on their place in wildness, or they might not.

As seasons pass, I learn to smell snow on the air before it arrives. Then it falls in big flakes, lightly covering the ground in layer upon layer before the sun appears and the sky is a blinding blue against the white glare of earth. When the snow melts on Lone Mountain and the ski runs disappear, the streams below the scree swell and rush into the valley. I begin to crave summer where my hips sway with the grasses and the breeze leads me to the edge of the Gallatin River. Along the narrow and rocky riverbed where

the Gallatin cuts through the canyon, rock shoots up, drawing my eyes skyward. There, sharp mountain ridges slice into the clouds and reveal the atmosphere. I realize that there are some things to hate about winter, like what it can do to people, but here those things are easier to forgive. In early spring and late summer, the water is low and the color of jade. Its glacial green stands crisp against spring snow and highlights the patterns of the bottom in the summer. Floating down the river, my eyes are repeatedly drawn to its curves. A grizzly cub bounds along the bank, spooked by the boat. A Model -T Ford rusts and crumbles in the bank of the river where the highway meets it. I name the wildflowers that sprout along the high-water mark, Montana Rose, Fireweed, Aster.

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1999, this intimacy shattered. I took the day off from skiing and stayed home to make candles. The house was clouded with the heat of melting wax and the scent of vanilla. I poured the last candle and glanced at the clock. *Three-thirty, almost dark; okay, Paul, where are you, babe?* My boyfriend Paul and his ski patrol buddy had planned to ski a closed area at the resort that morning. Like most ski bum couples, we had established a rule: get home from the backcountry and call your significant other.

The phone rang, and I snatched it up after only half a ring. Paul's brother's voice came through, "Where was Paul skiing today?" I told him, "Dobies, why?" He said, "Oh jeez, okay, rumor has it that there was an avalanche and the Couloir slid. There's more to it, but I will call you back." He hung up. I dropped the phone and suddenly felt strangled by the hot air. While pacing around the house and trying not to panic, flashes of Paul pinned under snow, gasping for breath, kept crowding into my mind. *No, it's going to be fine. Take a deep breath.* Anxiety filled my stomach, and it was all I could do

not to throw up. *Okay, just chill, just wait.* The phone rang again promptly, and Jason blurted out, "One person is dead; one is injured." *Paul and Rich are the only two up there.* I felt like all of the sky was pressing down on me, like everything was about to go black. My knees tingled and weakened. Everything but the image of Paul's face drained from my mind. Paul was completely out of reach. Then Jason said, "But I think someone drove Paul's car down from the mountain, so that's good. We can assume that's good." I was confused and terrified. My head vibrated with so many questions that it began to ache.

Several more fragmented phone calls and a few hours later, Paul's drained voice filtered through the phone. "Jack's dead, D."

"I know, where are you?"

Everyone gathered at Jack's house. We were all numb. Paul sat immobile in a chair, staring at the floor. I dropped to my knees and wrapped up in him. *I don't know what to do. I thought he was dead. He's so sad. What is in his head right now? What do I do? Jack's gone. This is hard.* More than anything, guilt hung over me, for being relieved that I had not lost my lover on that day, even as the grief over Jack's death sank in.

Over the next three days, through fragments of conversation with Paul and our friends, the sequence of events that led to Jack's death became clear. Jack, Matty, Jason, Nicole, Troy, and Chris were hiking up to the snowfield with intent to ski the lower portion of the Big Couloir. The area was closed off by ski patrol because the snow base was not established. Though they were excited about getting tracks in the fresh snow, they took the proper precautions to determine avalanche danger. Like all well-trained

backcountry skiers, they dug a pit to expose the layers of the snow pack. Avalanche danger appeared to be minimal. Snow fell steadily as they worked.

They tested each person's avalanche transceiver and then began to ascend the east face. Jack and Matty lead the group, their skis strapped to their backpacks. As they traversed below the cliff called Dobies and headed toward the run out of the Big Couloir, a slab of wind-loaded snow broke loose above them. There was no way for them to see it in the thick cloud layer. The snow hit a trigger zone and the entire slope around the cliff released. The avalanche roared down and buried them both as their friends struggled simultaneously to keep their eyes on them in the massive white cloud and get themselves to safety. Matty was buried with his glove sticking out of the snow. They uncovered him swiftly. Jack yelled, "Man down!" as the avalanche swept him away, six feet down into a trap of snow, rock, and slide debris. Although Chris, Troy and Jason located his transceiver signal immediately, recovering him was a difficult task. Paul and Rich arrived just a minute or two after the slide and frantically scrambled up the slope to help the others dig Jack out. It took four grown men, all athletes and friends, to wrench him free. His body was twisted and crushed, but his face was washed with peace.

Jack's skis and pack had acted as anchors, pulling him down into the moving snow, making it impossible for him to ride the surface of the avalanche out. Paul, Rich and Jason tore the straps off of his backpack to free him, their bodies pumped with adrenaline, their breath fast and minds focused. Paul breathed into Jack's lungs while Rich pumped his chest. A brief flutter of a pulse brought them hope, and the three of them continued CPR. Snow continued to billow and shift on the slope above them and they hurriedly tried to move themselves out of the slide path, all the while carefully

attending to Jack until the ski patrol arrived. His friends did all that they could, but Jack died. As they rode the ski lift down to their cars, the endorphins that had enabled them to respond to the danger and intensity of the situation slowly gave way to shock. Paul felt his fingertips go cold and nausea creep up into his throat. None of them could speak.

* *

Just a week before, we had all been hanging out at Jack's house. Jack, Paul, and the other boys practiced tricks on the trampoline. I remember noticing the sparkle in Jack's eyes whenever he spoke and how he flung his body gracefully into one back-flip after another. I worried about him falling and hitting his head. His broad shoulders floated above the backdrop of the mountains and suspended him in the air, against the blue sky. This is how I see him now.

Jack's family and many friends scattered his ashes on the mountain three days after he died. As we shared memories of Jack in the following weeks and reflected on the nature of our own mortality, it became apparent that many of us held a common belief: We would all rather die doing something that we love, in nature, than any other way. This was not a new notion to me, and Jack's death never made me doubt it, but I found myself struggling with it. Jack knew the joy and risks of Big Mountain skiing. He celebrated it and it was his reason for being there. But was it something that skiing brought out of him or was it the relationship he had with the mountain? This we won't ever really know, but in order to regain control and some sort of understanding, we returned him to the very mountain that took him from us. Regardless of Jack's perspective, we could not separate him from Lone Peak. His life and death there in that place was dependent on the mountain. Fear of losing loved ones or dying before I am

ready has crept into my mind at unexpected times, but I have never connected it to the nature and wildness of a place or let it paralyze me. Yet in the months following Jack's death, it almost did.

For the first time in my life, death was piling itself on top of me. It was overwhelming because young friends and acquaintances were dying frequently, in and around Big Sky. Jack was not the first of them to die, nor was he the last. It felt like death was coming closer and closer. It was getting to be too much. Fear was encroaching on me in places that before had only brought joy and clarity. The bears in our backyard were no longer intriguing and beautiful, they were dangerous. Panic and uncertainty replaced comfort with darkness. Stars no longer illuminated the night sky enough for me to trust the shadows. I began to doubt the snow and the river into which it melted.

It was my second year of raft guiding and time to start taking customers out into the high water. In the first season, I looked forward to this challenge and had confidence in my skills. One learns to read the different personas that the river assumes each day. The water levels shift and the temperature fluctuates, revealing new features in a rapid, changing the speed of the ascent, and affecting the impact of a paddle stroke. I counted on these variations to make my trips exciting, but hadn't counted on my own inner landscape shifting and changing. Nightmares haunted me during training week. In one of them, my raft flipped at Portal Creek and two customers got caught under the oar frame. I kept trying to get under the boat to help them, even after they drowned. With every trip into the black water, their bodies became more and more decomposed, and still

I tried, but could not get to them. Each morning, I woke up so riddled with anxiety that I couldn't eat, feeling weak and shaky every time I set foot in the boat.

In the past, it was a thrill to swim in the Gallatin in mid-May, but that spring, all I could think about was how bodies had been lost in that river year after year. There were names for the bodies: Al, John, Andrea... I realized that the risks I had always enjoyed had concrete consequences attached to them. That spring there was only loss, not possibility, in the unruly nature of a river that I had always respected. It made no sense. The river had always held elements of unpredictability and force. That was part of the risk and what I based many of my decisions on. As a guide, you work with what you know and try to minimize what you don't know. Then you pray that you will make it through safely with your customers and they will begin to understand the nature of a river. Perhaps the prayers didn't seem as powerful anymore. It didn't seem to matter if someone felt connected to the land, or just used the land to connect with themselves. Nature can take you, regardless.

One afternoon in late May, four of us were paddling a training boat. These were friends who called me Lil' D because I was the smallest raft guide in the company, and they lavished brotherly affection or torture on me at any given moment. We were coming into Chief Joseph rapid, and one of the guys yelled out, "Who wants to swim it?" My friend Colin said, "Go for it, D." He had a beautiful smile on his face, and something came clear to me in that moment. Colin and Jack were friends. One week after Jack died, Colin's cousin also died in an avalanche. He felt those losses deeply, but there he was, loving the nature of risk as much as he always had.

I dropped my paddle and jumped out of the boat. The current pulled me away, slapping from every direction. It willed me towards sucking holes. It buried me in waves and took my breath in rapid smacks. But I struggled to keep my wits about me and my feet pointed downstream near the water's brown, churning surface. As I fought to catch my breath, I swallowed great gulps of spring runoff.

Although it felt like the rapid would never end, the swim only took me a few minutes. In that time, the cold water shocked me into acute awareness. As rocks shifted and ground below me in the river, a buzzing vibrated through my bones. Every muscle in my body tensed. The boat got further away from grasp. *Don't go, I don't want to lose anyone else.* My senses withdrew into the core in search of warmth and breath. My stomach scrunched and tightened. *I'm afraid of dying.* It was like collapsing into myself. There was no room inside for anything except that moment. *I am not comfortable with being out of control anymore.* No room for fear. *Why can't I love this?* No room for questions. *I am not who I used to be.* Absolutely no room for regret. The river brought fears to the surface. One by one, it pummeled them out and carried them away. *It is time to redefine your boundaries with this place.* Blood pulsed and rushed through me, melding with the sound of the current and the wind. Bodies have been lost in the Gallatin, but on that day, something shifted within me. I could love a place and love my friends, but I didn't have to love what they did nor do it myself. The boundaries and challenges I had been living by were not my own. The place that I loved was not where I was meant to be. In my life, it was somewhere in between.

My friends eddied out below the rapid and watched me bounce and twist through it. I punched through the last wave and rode the ripples into the slow water. The river

quieted and released, as I let myself float into the side of the raft. Colin hoisted me into the boat with one arm. I sputtered and collapsed at his feet while he laughed and said, "All we could see were your huge, wide eyes as you bobbed up and down in the wave train." I said, " Well, a girl's got to see where she's going."

I think I can let go. I think the river taught me. I closed my eyes and let the rocking of the boat calm me. I saw Jack. He was a graceful skier. His movement was musical, and he knew the contours of the mountain. What he did in life was not driven by fear but by love and curiosity. He had found his rhythm and was dancing his dance.

On that chilly day in May, the river and I danced our own.

* *

That was my last season of guiding rafts and living in Big Sky. The river is still a thready jade memory, a first impression that wore down the edges of dwelling in a place where nature still clearly defines life and death. In this heat of fire, I seek the shocking cold of the Gallatin to remind me of what has been learned. A single drop of water on my tongue, with the flavor of knowing. Knowing that the smoke has turned me inside, where ghosts and memories reside.

Totem Hunt IV

There is a joke that we share, mother and I.

We were butterflies or bees in another life.

Perhaps we were, or are in this very moment

I close my eyes and remember him brushing pollen from my nose

Just before leaning in to kiss me for only the third time

My giddiness was blamed on the intoxicating scent of lilacs

Not on the possibility of love

All this time

Seeking meaning from every brush with wild creatures

But all this time

Guided by attraction and buoyant curiousity

That carries me to a tiny perfect beauty

That leaps out from the earth

And enraptures me with whispers

Flower to Flower on invisible wings

Until your voice calls me home

Between Love and Earth

It names itself

In Late light, bright softening

I name it now

Women walking, bare feet stained red with powdery roadside soil.

Wrapped in yellow

Walking wrapped in purple

Towards us

White smiles greater than pain

Bundles balanced atop braids

Chakula Cha Usiku

The labor of living

So light upon her

That her hips sway

To the sky

Skin to match the earth

Eyes to match the stars

The first time I could name what would free me from the weight inside of me, I was in Kenya, watching women walk along the highway. They were singing the most beautiful words I had ever heard and not understood.

It felt like learning to walk inside my body. I was beginning to understood how to make myself my own. I wasn't guided by guilt. Failure never crossed my mind. My father could not touch this place.

* *

I thought that I would never let go of that feeling. But I did, for a while. And I named it love. I think that we should have as many words for love as the Eskimos do for snow. The word for this love would encompass the aching depth of voracity, cold loneliness, raw beauty and the paralysis of faith. Now my mouth gets dry and sometimes I swallow hard when I realize how long it takes to learn some things, even when time carries us through big changes as quickly as the river carries away dead and crumpled leaves.

It was only two and a half months ago that he was sitting with me in the driveway. I didn't take him seriously when he said it, even as I held back tears. "If I don't come back, you have to talk to my mom. You have to tell her that I am different, that I need to do this kind of stuff. I can't not do it."

The words that I wrote to him six months earlier kept ringing in my head. "*We have a thick and deep history...all I can offer you from this moment forward is a loving and devoted friendship.*" And still he was here, three years and many men after we broke it off. "*We aren't even friends, we haven't been able to get there yet.*"

"I'll come back baby, but you can have anything you want that is mine, if I don't."

Who was he saying this for? "*You are a sweet and unique soul Paul and the world is waiting for you to bring it more of your light. It is all in your hands.*" I had

tried to tell him numerous times, in gentle ways, in careful ways, that we would never be lovers again. I was tired of giving him support and advice that he didn't heed. What mattered most to me was knowing that *my* life was in *my* hands. I had taken it all back, never mind that I was the one to give it away in the first place. But still he was here, needing me before he left for Peru, and still I was here, giving him what he needed and getting something for myself too.

He was going to Peru to climb and then ski Alpamayo, a popular runneled, fluted peak, 19,000+ft high. People had climbed it many times; skiing it was a different story. Only one other attempt had been made before. He thought that on this trip, the chance of dying was greater than any other. He'd rappelled over semi truck sized cornices into narrow steep couloirs. He'd skied a season Chamonix. He'd dug friends out of avalanche debris, smashed his face, bungee jumped in New Zealand and surfed in Costa Rica. I had walked with women in Africa.

In the time I knew Paul, the only moments in which he seemed to really like life were when he was pushing its boundaries, physically.

My friend Korey told me recently that Nova did a special on people who participate in extreme sports. He remembers some theory that these people possess a different gene, one that predisposes them to that kind of thrill seeking. We were talking about this on the phone just before he left for Peru with Paul.

Paul left their expedition early. It turned more into mountaineering than skiing. When the effects of higher altitude set in, on the North face of Arteson Raju, Paul figured it might be his last day on earth. The wind was so strong that latching a single buckle on his ski boot seemed to take the strength of Hercules. He didn't feel like he had any

control over himself and got scared. "When you get in situations, like I tend to get myself in, you really think about what's important."

I wonder if he realized that he doesn't want to die yet either. Maybe he likes life more than he used to. He says that he won't ski another season in Big Sky. He has enrolled in school. He's auditioning for a band in Phoenix. He is focusing on other things for the first time since I have known him. When November rolls around, will he start dreaming of face shots and tram rides again? If he's got that set of genes, will anything else ever satisfy him?

If anyone had those genes, I bet Alex Lowe did. He was a Montanan who lived for the mountains and yes, ultimately died in them. In a March 1999 issue of *Outside* magazine, Alex was portrayed in an article titled, "The Alpha Zone, Masters of the Extreme." Aside from describing his awesome physical prowess, his enthusiasm and his cahones, the article addressed his conflict between mountaineering and everyday family life. He spent a lot of time flip flopping between "buckling down to a family-man job" and stockpiling impressive first ascents, speed-climbs and obscure climbing expeditions, until The North Face hired him to do precisely what he loved (and promote them).

It appears that Alex could only find true satisfaction in his life by pushing his boundaries in nature. Is it genes that Paul shares with this man who became legend? "It's hard to fit many lives into one lifetime," Alex was quoted saying. When he died, he left behind three sons and his wife Jenny who "has spoken forthrightly of her ability to carry on alone if necessary." What was it for Alex? I have read the article so many times, looking for little indications. He spoke of the wild appeal: "The ultimate attraction is the unknown. I want to climb routes that are remote and technically difficult.

Climbing for me is about solving the magnitude of the problem. The best projects are the ones with the big question marks hanging over them." Those questions were posed to him by the natural world, and I still wonder exactly what answers Paul looks for in the mountains. What are the questions ultimately? Are they about what a person can accomplish, or about what they have to learn? Are they even connected to nature or is nature just a tablet for the scribblings of human ego?

As James Hillman writes in the book, Ecopsychology, "An individual's harmony with his or her "own deep self" requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world. The deepest self cannot be confined to "in here" because we can't be sure it is not also or even entirely "out there!" Is it just harmony that so many of these "masters of the extreme" are seeking? Have we become so comfortable in day to day life that we need the raw challenge to shake us up or is this our way of dealing with a material society? Alan Thein Durning states in the same book that there is evidence showing the connection between consumption and personal happiness to be weak. I can't help but think that the trend towards extreme recreation has to do with some desire to subvert the priorities of mainstream society. One could call it extreme leisure by the dirtbag recreationist. "I don't care about money, I am going to show myself and the world how to live life to its fullest. And I am going to be more hard core about it than anyone else." This is Paul, partly, but more than anything, for him and many others there seems to be no in between. Unless you're me. He said he wasn't afraid of dying. I was. I am. It's not the death part for me; it's the missing out on life part.

* *

It's the fifth of July this year. I am on the fourth pitch of a climb in the Gallatin Canyon. The entire time that I lived down there, and loved Paul, I never had seen the place from this perspective. I was always down in the river, looking up at the tower, my stomach tight with anticipation, whispering little prayers for safety as I prepared to guide my patrons down through the techy rumblings of the Mad Mile. Now I am looking down at the boats, hung up in the shallows on rocks, while passengers bounce and yank to get their raft free.

I am wedged in a narrow chimney, maybe three feet wide, with only a crack to shove my hands into and virtually no places to put my feet. I can't catch my breath and keep muttering obscenities to myself, knowing that if I fall, a million possibilities could play themselves out.

"OK, D, just do it, you can do it. You know how. See it. Calm down. Breathe."

Somewhere above me, Dylan is feeling my weight on the end of the rope, pulling in slack with cautious blindness.

"I am so glad he can't hear me right now. I am such a pussy sometimes." I shove my forearm into the crack in front of me and lock down with my wrist; the cool rock sends Goosebumps up my arm and across my shoulders. I take a sharp breath and turn my hips, so that I am facing the wall perpendicular to the crack. A breeze hits my outer cheek and now I am cold.

"Damn it." I slide my foot up against the wall and push to take the weight off of my other foot. Slowly, back against one wall, I creep up through the chimney. Tiny movements, with panicked breath in between. Finally I find a good significant foothold and pop up over the little chimney.

I am afraid, but never paralyzed, and I realize as I shiver and look north up the canyon, that I have gone miles from this place and returned to find it vastly different.

* *

Paul sets his chiseled jaw when he smiles and it is his most perfect expression. He has one eyetooth that is only slightly angled out away from the other teeth and it gives the appearance of something a little crooked. The first time I saw him seven years ago, all I saw was his smile, because he was biking past me as I walked with Nakuru tied to my waist. I thought, "This really is a beautiful place." Little did I know that I would spend more time remembering his smile than seeing it. How different he was from what I saw.

I had always known loss as a sudden thing. Your grandpa dies and is no longer there to walk to the pond with and feed the swans. Your mom's antique turtle pin falls off your shoe (because that was the cool place to wear it) and you see her eyes water for just a minute, before she never mentions it again. Your best friend moves to another state and you don't have anyone to swing from the branches of the willow tree with anymore. But it was the slow loss of love and the loss of yourself to love that took some kind of learning to understand. This was a loss that that kept me from acknowledging my purpose and dream: the desire to understand and protect the natural world that had always kept me safe and helped me to find my way through life, until then, in that place.

Is there a space between love and earth? Would you find it sleeping or waking or in the throes of struggle with the mountain? I know that some lessons need to be learned, but their definitions seem to linger in the places we avoid, or maybe never even see. It's like the patience we learn in a yin yoga pose. It may feel uncomfortable or painful, and

to avoid that discomfort our instinct is to shift, but really if we sit still and breath through it, we not only learn to stretch more deeply, we learn to be patient with ourselves.

When I moved to Montana, my plan was to stay in Big Sky for the summer and then go elsewhere. I knew that I wanted to write. I knew that I wanted to pursue environmental studies. I knew that I didn't want to be a ski bum. When I met Paul two weeks after I moved there, I said to my mother on the phone, "I know he's not the one, but I like him."

Big Sky is a place of distinct beauty, but it was a beauty that I never became comfortable with. I felt a sense of wildness there, like I had in Africa, but this wildness was darker, and my love for Paul became a reflection of my love for the place. It was a tight empty feeling that should be left alone, but I didn't. I watched storms roll in on summer afternoons. Dark clouds would swarm over the peaks; lightning cracked the sky, startling me into fits of giggles. Five minutes later bright hot light ignited raindrops on the petals of wild sunflowers and balsamroot. Days seemed endless, and Paul kept saying, "You have to come back for winter."

And so I did. Earth, and the physical environment of winter that we lived in, became a stage for the differences in us and for the rift that welled up between us from the very beginning. The simple discrepancy in our approach to the mountain, to skiing, was inherent in our language. He would say things like, "Did you see me stick that line? I killed it." I would say, "Did you see my line down the gully, it hugged the trees and then followed the drainage out."

I spent our first day skiing "together," chasing him all over this mountain that I did not know. Lost in flat light, stuck in closed gullies at the bottom of unstable slopes, I

wanted to love all the snow and the hugeness of the mountain. Instead I wondered why Paul didn't want to wait for me and why he brought me along to begin with. He was driven to get *after* it, I was hoping to get *with* it.

It was not long before I realized that this was what winter meant to most people there, including Paul. After skiing, everyone would congregate in the locals dive bar, strip down to his or her bibs and polypro and exchange stories. Beer in hand, Billy would rub his free fingers through the tangled greasy mass on his head, "Yeah, dude, I thought it was over when I hit that rock in the steeps, but I kept it together and went moch five hundie out the gullies."

And so it went, day after day, line after line. It wasn't that I didn't see the beauty in living those moments; I just believed in more from the start. Somehow I believed that I saw everything more clearly. And some things I did, but still I learned a lot from being on that mountain everyday. When I look back and see how differently Paul and I spoke about skiing, it makes sense that we couldn't talk about the feelings that we carried with us. I realize too, that those tensions were/are indicative of how men and women of that lifestyle might approach challenges and competition differently.

I always felt an undercurrent with Paul as if he had a vendetta against the mountain and everyone it seems. I know part of it was his competitive nature, but I think that for him it was more and that is what I saw and what scared me. When he described the way his skis rattled at high speeds or how he carved a perfect turn into a windlip, his words were sharp and even, unhurried. But then he'd look out across the ski deck, see some guy looking over in our direction, look up at the mountain and clench his fist. He wanted to conquer it all, be the best, and beat fear.

I believed Paul couldn't speak his pain and so he skied it or played it. While he saw the challenge in teasing death and danger, I saw the challenge in loving him and teaching him to love himself enough. I thought he didn't. I didn't believe that skiing was the answer to Paul's losses, and I knew it was a path that led me away from my moral ties to the natural world. Yet I stayed there and tried to live it, trying to uncover and understand Paul's vulnerabilities, insecurities and losses. The losses, I only got glimpses of, because he held them inside himself. Perhaps that is why he loved speed and steepness. The extremes. He experienced death too much perhaps. I often wonder how I would talk about death or will talk about it, when I know it more intimately. I often wonder how valid my perspective is, because I was never in his shoes. I talk about losing myself to love, which is something at least one has some degree of control over. Paul had no control over his losses; they just happened. His father died of cancer when he was seventeen. I know that he pushed that grief away. I think that was the beginning and maybe the deepest sadness. I know that I hung on because I had faith in him and the tenderness of his heart. And so we were both wandering wildernesses with different agendas.

* *

One perfect morning, I rose late on a powder day. I knew it and I didn't care. The clouds were low in the meadow where I lived and the road up the mountain was dusted in a ½ inch of muffling snow, since the plows had gone by. Every one else could have their turns on Challenger. I didn't want to stand in the line and see Paul at the front of it, so close but so far away. I didn't want to feel the intense jostling of testosterone, nor hear everyone talking up his or her game. I rode up the lift alone, hunched over the

bar of the chair, watching the ground blur past my powder blue snowboard. The white of the earth always superimposed me onto the space between the chair and ground, altering my depth perception. If I stared down too long, I got dizzy, so I rubbed snow into the thumbs on my gloves. Adjusted my helmet. Felt myself shrinking inside the shell of my winter gear. I was separate from everything and the world was silent.

I decided to just see if the tram was open yet. It was so quiet in that place on the mountain. I knew there were people making turns somewhere. I knew the fresh powder would muffle their gleeful whoops and giggles. Still, it was so quiet. I dropped off the triple chair and carved easy turns in the buttery groom. The summit was completely concealed in clouds and I took in a slow breath of cool air.

It was dense on the summit. Clouds condensed on my goggles. I wondered if vertigo would set in. I cruised down onto the cat track and the cloud layer thinned a little. Just a little. My board was sluggish on the track. I was always bad about waxing it. I knew that I wouldn't have enough speed to get over the hump rock band and into Marx, but I didn't care, because there was no one around. I turned the nose of my board down the fall line and headed over to the First Dictator Chute. Only white around me. I knew it was steep, but I couldn't see it. I began to carve turns in the deep, bottomless snow. It folded around me. Like hands cupped, rocking, and swishing me, swirling me like water in the palm. An overwhelming hush overtook my body. Fingers suspended each part of me, belly to sky. I was lifted. Elated. I understood.

Two more laps on the tram before word got out. Paul was startled to see me and more so, to hear that I was three laps ahead of him. I was sad that I felt satisfaction in having beaten him for once. At having a better ski day. That we didn't share enough.

Before I moved to Big Sky and met Paul, I had carried very little fear with me. Athletically, I was game to try anything. Mountain Biking, Rock-Climbing, Skiing. I saw the environment around me as a playground and a space for learning. I trusted in the lessons that I learned from the woods. I took risks, but knew to approach things with a certain degree of humility. The new and wilder terrain that I encountered in Montana slowly shifted my perception of the natural world, and at times, I found myself terrified and paralyzed in places that would have enticed me before. I felt often like I was headed in the wrong direction and if I kept going that way, I would end up hurt or worse. Some of it came from knowing people who lost their lives in the time that I lived there. Some of it was in reaction to Paul's aggressive and "extreme" approach to the environment, but I think most of it came from no longer seeing myself clearly or from coming to a place of doubt about how I was living my life. I was pursuing this lifestyle of adventure and fun in the outdoors, but couldn't help feeling like I was moving away from the things that had helped me make sense out of my life.

On a rare day, Paul and I went out skiing together. I shot pictures of him doing helicopters and mute grabs off kickers and got a great shot of him leaning into a turn with a veil of snow and sun around him. Then we decided to head over to another part of the mountain. To do so, we had to traverse across an open slope that angled at about 40 degrees. He told me to go out ahead of him, and I did. Slowly, I began to ski across. It was a bright day and the sun warmed me. There were no protruding rocks, no avalanche chutes, nothing there to make my traverse excessively dangerous. But I froze. I couldn't make myself turn my skis down hill. I felt like this giant thumb was pushing down on my head, like the sun was too warm, like I was about to die. Paul lost patience and skied

past me. I needed him to come talk to me and sweetly wrap around me, no matter how silly I may have seemed. But that wasn't Paul's way. It never had been. And the alone I felt was the worst kind of alone there is. It looked to the rest of the world like I was one of two, but Paul was so far out of reach that I stood on a beautiful day, on a beautiful mountain, frozen by a fear that comes from loss of yourself, not your nerve.

* *

It was summer again. I was trying to remember the women in Africa and the song that they sing. By then I was telling my friends that I was learning to silence the truest parts of me, the parts that Paul never knew, but knew were there. I could say this, but not speak it.

Walking. Nakuru needed his walks, and I needed them just as much. Leash looped around my shrinking waist. White dog pulling white girl. Paul never walked with us. It wasn't enough of a rush for him, maybe. Sometimes I felt translucent. Or maybe it was too truthful. Does the intensity of speed and the adrenaline prevent the slow truths of his life from creeping in? Sun warming my lower back. Grass brushing against my calves. I needed the slow time to make sense out of the truths in my life. Speed scared the shit out of me. Bright yellow balsamroot illuminates the shadows. I didn't want to get hurt. The path gets steeper and more narrow in the woods. Uphill my legs strain and stretch. Aching. I am hurt. Nakuru is tied to my waist, so my hands are free. They always had to be free so I could feel the air push through the spaces between my fingers. The love I want is not the love he is giving me. I am listening for answers.

Two startled Mulie deer come pounding through the forest. They see us and stop, still. Ears twitch and hoofs shift. "It's ok Mulies. It's ok. Its just me." I am not a

demanding person. Am I? They turn and lope back down and away. What was wrong with the way I expressed my feelings? Why was I holding on to this so tightly? The answers didn't come, but the wildflowers did and the mother bear with her cub. I played hide and seek with a coyote once, too. And this part of me, he will never know. Once you are tangled, no matter what you know, it is the untangling that holds you down. It is the untangling that is the hard part. It is the untangling that took away my ability to trust, to have faith, to move forward.

I stopped writing. Stifled. Faded. Bones, hair. Gone. Winter silence fit me. I lost the ability to keep weight on. I chopped off all of my hair and bleached it white. I couldn't see my way out. I couldn't stop loving this man, who was tender and sweet, suffering and selfish. Giving up on the relationship translated into giving up on him, and I didn't want to do that to him. I loved him up, until there was no more of me to love. He'd hug me and say, "Baby, your shoulders are so bony now." I thought I could see so clearly through things, but how can you when you can't see yourself clearly?

* *

It was a summer morning. Paul and I had been talking about taking this hike together for a few weeks. We wanted to climb Wilson Peak, the pointed bare jagged mountain opposite the north face of Lone Peak. It too was high, somewhere around 11,000 feet.

We started later than we wanted. I in my board shorts and trail shoes, a tank top and sports bra. He in his board shorts, running shoes, and T-shirt already tucked into his shorts. Some days you just don't want anything weighing you down. We began the hike

up Yellow Mountain. It looked long, but easy, just linking mountain to mountain until hitting the flanks of Wilson and its giant garden of boulders, piled up to the peak.

As we ascended the mellow hilly face of Yellow Mountain, my eyes traced gravel and shells beneath my feet. Fossilized material was everywhere on the mountain, and so many sparkly rocks. Paul hiked ahead of me, as usual, his long legs carrying him much farther much faster. Every once in a while he would stop and say, "C'mon D, we have a long way to go." I would pick up a rock and show it to him, and he would cast it aside. The sun was hot that morning, but the breeze pushed around the East Side of the mountain and kept us cool. We passed through little stands of forest, across herd paths and into rocky groves where we could feel the bears and lions. Every once in a while I would catch the bitter and pungent smell of elk, and we would hear a faint muffle of their voices pushing through the trees. When we reached the top of Yellow, we entered a forest with scrubby grass floors and twisted pines. It was moist up there, and cool, but comfortable. When we broke out of the forest, we could see the backside of the mountain, curving down into a sprawling valley. All the mountains there converged in ripples and rivulets, like clawfoot tubs, clutching the land, talons before lift off. Speckled by reflective cool of glacial lakes.

From that place we could see Wilson Peak, a spire against the sky. The summit didn't seem so far away and the threatening clouds in the south seemed even farther away. Low trees crouched on each side of the ridges, flagged from mountain winds into bonsai forms. Over each hump, we thought we would be at the foot of the peak, but it eluded us. We came to a place where the ridge narrowed and rocks jutted out chaotically over the valley.

Clouds covered the blue. Pink fierce light leapt statically from treetop to treetop, below us. It began to rain, lightly at first, and as we hopped from boulder to rock, our footing became more and more slick. In the second that thunder deafened the air around us, we chose to abandon the summit. Paul thought we needed to get low, quickly, so we began to drop down away from the peak, and wrap around the face of Wilson. Thunder rumbled and I could feel my heart respond, adrenaline pumping. Another flash of lightning and I jumped: Paul was ahead of me and I was slipping and sliding down this pile of scree. I thought I would twist my ankles, there was already a thread of blood mixed with rain flowing from my knee. I thought he was going to leave me behind. His hands were far out of reach and with the storm over us, I never felt so alone. My hands were tingling. I called to him and he stopped. "Wait for me, please Paul"

"C'mon baby, c'mon, we have got to get to a better place," I stumbled towards him, rocks shifting under my feet.

"If I hurt myself, we'll be in a lot more trouble." He grabbed my hand for a minute and we started to loop back in the direction from which we had come. We climbed a little higher and it began to hail. Marble size stones plummeted from the sky above us and grazed our skin. Cold, wet, we put on our raincoats, but still our legs were bare, goosepimpled pink flesh, like chickens just plucked. Stones pounding us. We found a few trees and ducked under them, clinging to the mountainside. It sounded like the sky was breaking above us. I remembered how my sisters and I used to joke that thunder was God rearranging his living room, and then I felt my sisters' voices and my father's anger resonate above us, for just a moment before I took a breath.

Voluminous clouds puffed across the sky, alternately covering us with shadow and opening spaces for the sun. We returned to the top of Yellow Mountain in good time. Paul went ahead of me again, but he finally stopped and nodded his head. "We are off course."

"I was wondering," I said. We backtracked and soon realized that the mountain was shaped like a horseshoe, and we had been on the wrong side. We kept walking until we broke out into the sunshine and a meadow with slick, thick tufts of lush grass. There we sat and warmed ourselves, watching a rainbow worm its way across the sky until it spanned the mountains in the north.

* *

That day on the mountain was just a microcosm of our relationship. Paul loved being with me on his terms. He could only let me get so close before he would move away again. I followed him, wanting to share with him my love for him and the earth, and wound up feeling alone and lost most of the time. I thought that experience on Wilson Mountain would have brought us closer together, but really, it took me further away and eventually, I kept walking.

There was part of me that had always trusted in the simplicity of love, until Paul, although I knew that love wasn't always eternal or even always ended well. I didn't need to look far to learn that: my own parent's relationship was a testament to those very things. But with Paul, I learned to define love in different terms. I realized that I defined our relationship by what it wasn't or where it fell short, not by what it was.

When that reality sunk in, it felt like my insides condensed into a tight ball of twine. I woke up every morning, questioning my reason for being there, when my very

lifestyle was not in keeping with what I believed to be a purposeful and meaningful life. I stared in the mirror at my hollow face and bony shoulders and wondered where I had gone.

* *

Winter Solstice, 1999. I rode the chairlift with my friend Sherrilyn. Paul was somewhere on the mountain. "No friends on a powder day," and definitely no lovers, even if it is your birthday. I reached in my pocket and pulled out a moonstone, dried sage leaves, turquoise pebbles and shredded remnants of handmade paper, with a prayer scrawled on them. As the whir and hum of the chairlift filled in the gaps in our conversation, I released the handful and watched them fall to the earth, with the varying speeds. I looked at Sherrilyn. She smiled and said, " I got married on winter solstice, once."

I said, "This is not where I want to be." I turned twenty-five on that day. I was in love with someone who, I believed, didn't know how to love himself. After three years in that place, I could admit it and understand why. I was riding a chair lift, looking at the sharp cuts, slicing veins down the flanks of this wild and beautiful mountain. For the first time in my life, the mountain was a place of loneliness, ambiguity and at times fear. Skiing, Paul's greatest passion, was my greatest conflict. Growing up, I loved skiing. In Big Sky, it came to be this thing that I forced upon myself, to somehow be closer to Paul, to find a way to connect to this beautiful and awesome place, to overcome my new fears.

I was troubled everyday by my inability to justify my lifestyle. I did nothing to protect or restore the land around me. I didn't even have conversations with friends and locals about what the development of the resort was doing to the watershed, the woods,

or the wildlife. I knew the agenda of the corporation that ran that resort. I knew that most folks living there didn't think much about their role in nature, and what the impact of their lifestyle was, or if they did, they didn't act. Just like me. I didn't act.

I knew one woman there who did act. She started a chapter of Mount-n-Surf in the area. She was a rippin' snowboarder and she often spoke at events, like ski movie premiers and slide shows. The organization's main focus was to get "riders" involved in taking responsibility for the resources they so enjoyed, like the mountains, rivers and oceans. When she left, Mount-n-Surf faded into Big Sky's past.

Outside magazine profiled a skier alongside Lowe; a Canadian named Eric Pehota. He comes from a logging town in B.C. And when asked about his profession, ends up quoting a friend, "It's the ultimate paradox, the closer you get to death, the more alive you feel." I find myself intrigued by this man, not because he has reached this legendary status as a skier, but because he seems different than the rest of the hard cores. "My goal is to be totally self-supporting," he says. Somehow he seems closer to the answer, the connection that I believe in.

I am trying to understand, how those that live this kind of lifestyle seem to be striving for some kind of connection, some kind of thrill, some kind of answer that they touch when they are out in nature, but don't really attribute it to nature. Nature is the backdrop.

I have learned to ask myself what I would do without nature. How would I live without these beautiful and wild places? I envision myself insane, like a lion in a cage. Paul never asked himself that question. Did Alex? Does Eric? And what are their answers? Does the answer motivate protection, action, and conversation? You wouldn't

know it from *Outside* magazine. If these men or any "Masters of Extreme" care to act on some sort of environmental ethic, popular culture doesn't acknowledge it. I see that as a problem. I find it scary. I don't believe that this lifestyle can bring true enlightenment or fulfillment by excluding a reciprocal relationship with nature. I don't believe that living this way can compensate for what our society lacks spiritually without including an ethic towards the environment. People seem to live it until they die in nature or live lives that are grossly out of balance. I was living a life out of balance even though I lived a life seemingly so connected to earth.

The last summer we were together, Paul worked solo, cutting down trees for ski runs. Cutting down trees. I have never cut down a tree in my life. Only planted them. I stood there and shot pictures of him cutting down trees. We named our new dog Timber, in remembrance of that summer. I remember how my heart wrenched with the pervasive whirring of the saw. Each tree that fell before my eyes became some aspect of my convictions toppling. The silence between when the trunk was severed and the splintering crash of wood hit earth felt smothering. I had abandoned all that I knew I was before. Here I was a girl who wouldn't even step on an ant, recording the death of these trees. Trees were being cut down for the sheer pleasure of a few skiers, left where they fell, to be covered by snow and forgotten. It is not so much that I condemn Paul for what he was doing. It is that I condemn myself for going against my own nature. For not acting to respect what I really valued, because I still wanted our love to bloom. It was selfish really. I had no consciousness except for the one that learned to tread lightly around his. He never would have known the sound of my inner turmoil on that day,

because by that time, I had learned not to say anything, for fear of a fight, a battle, another chance to doubt myself.

African women walking. I loved that man once with the blindness of snow, sliding and melting down my spine. They walk, curving, tall, slender limbs. A fiber connecting earth and sky. Long, twisting, like a thread of DNA. Heads up. Proud gaze. Balancing the burden while hips sway. I cannot see my fingertips in the clouds. Bare feet burn across the snow. Skin to match the soil. Eyes to match the stars.

When I told him it was over, I meant that I was taking myself back. I never knew any one thing more than I knew that. I wanted to walk differently. Walking along the roadside, smelling the spring urges of the sagebrush. Stroking the velvety leaves with my fingertips and holding them to my nose. I felt an inkling of freedom. Some old familiar presence. My own. Cautiously slipping back into my skin. But I was shocked to find a smaller body, an unfamiliar space. Sunken eyes and hips that hurt when I leaned into anything.

* *

I woke at 4 a.m. months later and stepped outside to find the sky pulsing above me, wrapped in green and white breathy wisps of the northern lights. There was a meteor shower and stars streaked and fell across the sky. A celestial hush filled the night around me and I felt myself lift to the sky. The weight of walking dissipated and I knew finally, that I could let go.

Maybe I needed that time in Big Sky to test myself and all that I knew. And still, I cannot separate Paul from that landscape. I had to leave it to move on. I still shy away from skiing. But here, I am in a different place and people command it more. I have

never lived in such an urban setting, and I wonder if this is part of the letting go and the disentangling. Now when I wander away from this little city, the African women walk with me, and I bring them into winter, to test my strength and resilience, to remember how far I have come and to make up new words for love.

It is six degrees. Night comes quickly in winter, yet covers the sky like a slow settling. Feathers falling from high above. The past two days have been crisp and clear, with bright sun shocking us out of our mental hibernation. Packing into this place with a friend was a steep and icy endeavor. We didn't think to bring cramp-ons or axes, only packs full of warm clothes, the dogs and lots of silliness. We set up our tent on a bed of snow, not bothering to level it out since we plan to stay for only one night. Then we watch the light dwindle and the stars push through the atmosphere. The moon is waxing, about half full. It is bright enough to reflect off the snow and illuminate the valley, but not so bright that we can't name the constellations. Little Dipper. Cassiopeia. Orion. We wish that we knew more.

The constant flow of water is the only sound that breaks through the muffled layers of winter. We hear it splashing on the rocks across the creek. Warm water in winter. After sipping on tea, our core temperatures are still dropping with the night air and there is only one way to get warm. We grab our towels and cross the creek, up onto the hillside opposite our tent site. There we fumble around in the darkness and steam until we find it. We strip down, toes burning, breath shortened. We cannot find the pool soon enough, plunging in and feeling the stinging of cold flesh in hot water.

Once in the hot spring, I lean back and absorb this place. We talk a bit, but then fall to silence. Edges. Stepping off places. I am realizing as I sit in this circle of water

and I look up at the circle of trees opening onto a circle of sky, that I have come full circle again. This has been a long lesson, this one, and I am at the dropping off point. I feel the trees and the stars tugging, lifting and grounding me simultaneously. I want to stay in this place forever, but I also want to go. There is much to do. It has been a long time since I have felt this way, and the first time in forever, it seems, that I have claimed a place and a moment for my own heart. I am seeing circles overlap everywhere, and the fear, well, it's gone again. But the questions linger, and I wish that someday, I will understand that fragment of my life, shared with so many others. That fragment, where we all seem to be seeking, in the space between ourselves and earth.

Totem Hunt V

I am running past an old Homestead and up in to Cherry Gulch where the hills stretch broadly from the trail, like two lovers sleeping back to back, touching only where their hips and ribs meet the bed. Its hot and I like it, running in the dry early green of a Montana summer. As I round the corner of a dilapidated barn, I see a sign handwritten in bold letters. **Caution: Fox Den Do Not Disturb.** I wince and remember the fox that we found last year, just on the other side of this hill, snared in a fence. Her red fur rising lightly in the breeze giving an illusion of breath that she no longer possessed. Amy and I struggled to free her from the cable before folding a blue tarp around her to bury her in the hillside overlooking home. This was what we thought to do, even as our dogs circled our procession playfully, curiously sniffing at the tarp and nipping at each other. We scattered wildflower seeds on her grave and after, as we drove home, little black fleas emerged from our clothing.

Amy pulled her hat form her head and through her static tangled hair, cautiously exclaimed, "Damn it, that little bitch had fleas."

Later, I washed them from my body in a shower laced with tears. We always intended to go back and see if the seeds took.

Sunlight and Feathers

Some mornings I wake up thinking about bloodied white feathers. There seems to be no particular thing that laces my dreams with them. But hopelessness and fury dwell right along side the stained scattered feathers of my mind. Last time it was because I met a man who had just been beaten, blood running down his cheek from over his eye. Having dropped my bike on the sidewalk, I cupped his face in my cold hands and tilted his head so that the street light shone on the gash across his brow. "I'm OK," he said, but the trembling in his voice told me differently. "I want to help you, let me help you," I asked. His hands shook and he looked away from me. Tears slid down his cheeks and thinned out the blood that had crusted on his face. He only wanted to go, and so I let him. It was a mild February night, just before we went to war in Iraq for the second time, and my home, Missoula, Montana felt too far from anywhere to change anything, but still too close to fury.

* *

It is October of 2001. Cold wind whips across my cheeks, stinging my skin and making my eyes water. I have just emerged from a narrow damp tunnel onto the wooden deck that overlooks Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana. It takes me a moment to adjust to the site before me. A massive hole, 600 acres wide, has been carved into the earth. Red and brown layers of soil cut deep into a history much older than I can fathom. Yet somehow, I feel an inkling of my own history welling up within me.

No trees grow here. The only motion is that of the wind putting dimples on the surface of the red brown water and the trickling of streams pouring out of the abandoned mine shafts that dot the walls of the pit. Old machinery stands like industrial skeletons.

A woman with a voice like a 1950s housewife breaks the silence. "Welcome to the Berkeley Pit," the recording says cheerfully. What is welcoming about this place, I think. I listen to the history of the Pit and about how it is being "managed" now. "The water in Berkeley Pit is highly acidic." In reality it is dangerously acidic. It dissolves aluminum boats. The Pit is one mile wide, and deeper than a quarter mile. In 1982, just after the Superfund Law was passed, the pumps that prevented the pit from filling with water were shut down, hence commencing a perpetual flood which has created what the journalist Edwin Dobb terms a "hazardous soup" over 30 billion gallons full of it.

The Berkeley Pit is the largest visible blemish on the historical face of mining worldwide. At one time Butte was the largest city between Minnesota and California, with a population of 100,000 people. The city has celebrated the longest copper mining run in history and now is home to and at the headwaters of a 120-mile environmental disaster area. I think of Berkeley Pit as the giant umbilicus of an exotic dancer, moving and shaking to all the sensual, passionate, violent, and dark music of capitalist, extractive nature. A dancer that will dance through all the millennia of man, for there is no end in sight. The best plan for cleaning up the Pit involves postponing clean up. Water will always flow through the mines and into the Pit. Dobb writes, "The infernal receptacle will always be cursed. Not for a hundred years, not for a thousand, but always."

I reach into my pocket and listen to change jingle in my fingers. I pull out a penny and turn it over in the cloudy light of afternoon. My stomach tightens and I look out across the brown water at the layers of earth exposed and crumbling into the dead space before me. I do not have a memory for this place before now. I wasn't raised in Montana, and didn't really know about Butte until I had lived in the state for several

years. Yet, standing in this place, this dead irreparable place, I am overcome with the aching emptiness of loss. I have a memory for loss.

* *

My grandfather was a dentist with big crooked teeth. He did our dental check-ups when we went to visit him in New Jersey. "Say ahhhh," he'd say and then use a big wooden tongue depressor to peer into our mouths. "OK kid, things are looking just fine in there." Before helping us out of the chair, he'd bring over a box full of brightly colored animal erasers and let us pick one. My favorite was a blue porcupine.

He was not a big man, although from my perspective, I thought he was very tall. He was skinny and fair skinned with long features. He had a lot of energy and enjoyed driving his tractor all over the property, picking up brush, or repairing the fence line. Grandpa was my mother's father and the only one who could make me laugh when I had been crying all day.

My memories of my grandfather, I realize, are a conglomeration of my own experiences and of my mother's. I knew him to be a stubborn man, not because I necessarily witnessed it as a child, but because my mother spoke of it often. At times his stubbornness manifested itself in bigotry, a notion that I have never been able to fully grasp because I never saw it in him, being his beloved grandchild. But he was, nonetheless, the same man that refused to attend my mother's wedding because she was marrying an Italian. He came to love my father and my father loved him in return, one of the few bonds my father openly and honestly embraced.

I can see Grandpa's nimble stride as he is running down the long steps of their Jersey shore home through the eyes of my mother who was nearly drowning beneath the

dock, clinging with her tiny hands to one of the barnacle covered beams. I can hear him yell, "I am coming Carol, hang on, I'm coming."

In all of my memories Grandpa's hands are distinct, shaping out the flow of his mannerisms or accenting one of his goofy, raw, and simple jokes. He has his hands cupped around Grandma's shoulders while she is pushing asparagus spears onto our dinner plates. "Ooh, it looks like we're having sparrow guts for dinner," he says, looking at me from the corner of his blue, half moon shaped eyes. He snickers and kisses Grandma on the cheek while she swats at him with the serving spoon. At any given moment Grandpa has my hand in his and we are skipping down the street or looking at the trees in the orchard. When they sold their big house and moved into the apartment that used to be his office, we began a new tradition of walking to the pond down the street.

These are memories that I have held in my mind effortlessly over the years, allowing room to think of my grandpa when I find myself in spaces of comfort and optimism. But something changed on the night that I stared into the face of that beaten man and realized that we had both lost something. The despair of that moment made me feel as empty and barren as the Berkeley Pit and I couldn't remember what it felt like to call anywhere home.

* *

It is a cool September morning. I stand in my grandparent's front yard and stare up at the trees that line their driveway. White rays of light blur the edges of the leaves and I squint, making everything out of focus and fuzzy. My eight-year old hand clutches a plastic bag of bread scraps so tightly that my palm sweats and it gets itchy between my

fingers. Grandpa slams the front door and is by my side in seconds. " Are you ready peanut? Let's go feed the ducks."

He gently grabs my free hand. I pull his fingers close to my face and focus in on the blue green veins that spider across the back of his hand. "Are the swans going to be there too, Grandpa?" I wait for him to smile and clack his big crooked teeth at me.

He grins, "We'll just have to see, won't we?"

We skip and hop the entire three blocks to the pond, out of breath but laughing when we reach the water's edge. A small flock of mallards and a boisterous crew of Canada geese paddle over to us as I rustle the bag of bread and exuberantly throw scraps into the air, laughing as the birds scramble and splash in the water. Then I place some near my feet, hoping that the ducks will come closer, so I can see how their wings shine black and green in the sunlight.

When most of the bag is empty, I twist it closed and hold it tight again. "Aren't you going to finish the bag?" Grandpa asks.

"Shhhh, Grandpa, I want to save some for the swans."

He winks at me and says, "Why don't we go sit on the bench for a little while, Hmmm? I bet if we wait, they will swim over."

"Yeah, but only if those pesky geese leave. We have to pretend there's no more bread."

We plop down on the bench and watch the sunlight spark off the dark water. The pond is pleasantly lined with perfect square stones and a walkway. I stare at the small scrubby island that sits just off shore, waiting for a glimpse of the swans. Behind us, a car door slams and a couple comes wandering down to the water's edge, following their

toddler. The little boy is dressed in overalls and a red hooded sweatshirt that matches his father's. "Look at that cute little boy, Grandpa."

Grandpa nods, "He likes the ducks too."

By now, the geese are noisily preening themselves on the opposite shore of the pond. From behind the island, I catch a glimpse of white. I whisper, "Here they come Grandpa."

He squeezes my hand. "Let's wait to walk down there, so we won't scare them away."

"OK," I say, my feet swinging and kicking over the edge of the bench. I can't sit still.

Slowly, she glides across the glassy pond, her white feathers bright against the black water. Her neck gracefully curves up towards the sky, like the arms of the ballerinas that I saw in the Nutcracker. After her, the babies come, paddling madly to keep up. "Here come the signets," Grandpa says.

"Signets," I echo with a whisper. The fuzzy speckled signets bob and lurch in a squiggly line that makes me giggle. But I fall silent and still when the father appears behind them. He moves effortlessly in the water; his neck is strong and he proudly ruffles his wings across his back. His white is even brighter than the mother's and the black of his eye sparkles like my mom's jett necklace. I want to see him fly. "Let's tiptoe down there." Grandpa whispers. We stand and begin to creep back to the water. I start untwisting the bag, as quietly as I can.

The swans are coming up on shore. The little toddler shrieks in delight and runs at them, enticed by the fuzzy signets. "Soft, soft," he screams. The signets scatter and

the father swan lunges at the toddler. His long neck is held straight and pointed, his beak poised to strike. He pecks the child once, twice. The whole pond erupts in squawks, screams, motion. "Grandpa!" I yell. He grabs my hand. The toddler is screaming and crying. His mother is yelling, "Do something!" The father runs to the car and pulls something from the backseat.

In seconds he has returned. I see flashes of silver in the sunlight. The man's arms come down, once, twice. An unearthly cry rises out of the chaos of feathers and red sweatshirts. The sound makes me tremble. "Grandpa, Grandpa!" The man swings forcefully, again and again. Grandpa scoops me up and buries my face in the brown check of his flannel shirt. He squeezes me tight and his arms muffle the sounds. I can hear his low voice, "Now, now." But above it rises a mournful and terrifying sound. A high pitched call, haunting cries that intensify, then shatter and fade. Grandpa presses his cheek against the top of my head and turns us away from the sound. He breaths in sharply, "We should go home now." I force my head away from his chest and sniffle. "But Grandpa, are the swans OK, where is the little boy?"

I want to see. I have to see. I wiggle in Grandpa's arms and peek over his shoulder as he quickly carries me away from the pond. First I see the young woman clutching her toddler tightly in her arms and walking towards the car. I shift my gaze from her and cannot take my eyes away from what I see then. The man stands with his hand lowered, clutched in it a shiny silver bat streaked with red as bright as his sweatshirt. He gapes motionless at the pile of white crumpled glory on the ground, stained and splattered with blood. The mother swan and the signets stand in a tight group, a mass of trembling fluff and confusion on the other side of the body. She lowers

her neck tentatively and rubs the lifeless form that was her mate, her mate for life. The scene before me is brushed with a haze of paralysis, where nothing but the immutability of loss is certain, and the confusion that rises from it clings to all life that served as a witness.

My whole body trembles with tears and I wrap my arms as tight as they will go around Grandpa's neck. "Grandpa, why did that swan have to die?"

"That man was protecting his son."

"Grandpa, would that have happened if we didn't feed the swans?"

"I don't know peanut, I don't know." He squeezes me tighter then.

* *

Years later, I am sitting on the red shag carpet of our TV room, leaning up against the couch. My sisters lounge above me as we watch the Brady Bunch. Dark fell only a few minutes ago. Mom and Dad come in to the room and stand up where the TV is. It's weird that they are standing there together. "Girls, we have something important to tell you." My mom starts out slowly. "Your grandpa is very sick." I stopped listening. I didn't mean to, I just did. Mom kept asking me, "Danielle honey, are you listening?"

"Yes!" I snapped right back at her.

I wasn't. I didn't. Until the night when mom was tucking me in and I cried, "Why does it have to be my Grandpa!" She held me and said I don't know. I have never asked her if she wondered why it had to be her father.

Grandpa was diagnosed with colon cancer, although by the time they found it, it had moved to his liver. They gave him three months to live and being a stubborn man, he

lived three years. He didn't look sick until the last few months. He became so pale and his fingers got really knobby, the veins on his hands a darker blue.

Mom would spend several days in New Jersey helping to care for him and then would come home to Vermont for a few, to make sure we were ready for the next week of school. Finally Mom's faint voice filtered through the phone on the night that he died. "Grandpa is gone, honey, but he was ready to go, and Grandma and your aunts and uncle, we were all here with him."

My grandpa was gone.

* *

I went back to the duck pond recently, when I was back east for my cousin's wedding. There is a new pair of swans there, and I commented to my mother about how horrible it was when that man murdered the swan.

"Danielle, I don't remember that."

"What? Grandpa and I were there, mom."

"No, you weren't honey, it didn't happen."

"Yes it did, Mom. I remembered it not long ago. Why would I remember something that didn't happen?"

"Honey, I know you and Grandpa witnessed no such thing."

"Well, where did that come from then?"

We asked my Aunt about it. "Oh yeah," she said. A man did murder a swan down there. It was attacking his son. But that was after Grandpa died, Danielle. You guys couldn't have been there. We must have just told you about it. Horrible story. Just awful."

I got a little dizzy and my hands were all cold and clammy. "I don't get it. I swear, I remember it so clearly."

Why did I construct such a traumatic memory for myself? What purpose did it serve?

* *

In November of 1995 a flock of snow geese landed in the Berkeley Pit on their way to California from Canada. I envision the water looking like blood smeared on their vibrant white feathers, as their carcasses washed up on "shore" in the days following. Three hundred and forty-two geese died in the Pit. Autopsies revealed that the poisonous waters ate them from the inside out. The following spring, Dobb wrote, "The snow geese were instantly canonized as martyrs to copper mining, yet another sacrifice demanded by the gods of extractive industry. The symbolism was easy to grasp and even easier to exploit, but it was nonetheless misleading because it suggested that innocence died in Summit Valley last November when in fact it had expired many generations earlier, when the mining camp was settled and its fallen character firmly and permanently cast."

Bloodied white feathers. Memories that are not mine, but occupy me indiscriminately. Is this my memory of loss?

* *

I withstand the wind at Berkeley Pit for half an hour, listening to people discuss the scientific aspects of the water and the social and environmental implications of a potential clean-up plan, estimated to cost millions of dollars. My heart thumps in the top of my chest, up near my mouth it seems. My body feels empty, like a steel drum, echoing the calls of birds in flight. I did not know this place before it became a loss, even

though I had a hand in its making, like any good American girl, selling lemonade for pennies to fill her piggy bank, using the power that flowed, so seemingly infinite, through the wires from a copper mine, somewhere far from home.

Maybe swans dying in my memories were my version of Grandpa dying or letting him go. Perhaps that is how I learned to grieve, because at thirteen years old, grandpa dying, high school starting, and Mom and Dad beginning to end was all too much.

What can the people of Butte do with this glaring loss that will not fade? The Pit already ate much of their history, when it was created to replace the old methods of shaft mining. Whole neighborhoods were swallowed by it. The community park and amusement area went along with them. The earth turned inside out, right over the houses of the people's ancestors. I can turn my loss into memories and dreams, but *this* loss is as heated and real as sunlight on my skin.

I know somewhere the little boy with the red sweatshirt turns a penny over in his hand. I wonder what he carries with him from that day at the pond, so long ago, that day that I missed but remember. I wonder how he dwells in his spaces of pain. I wonder if he defines loss with feathers and sunlight and if he sees it reflected in the faces around him.

In my own memories, I recall that my life and my hands have played a part, holding a bloody bat, hungering for the seductive liberty of a material, treasure laden . world. Perhaps memory is simply a place for us to go when we can't make sense out of our own present. And maybe it doesn't matter if memory is a reflection of reality; maybe it just matters what we do with it, how it shapes our perspective on life.

Yet I want to feel the fine softness of feathers beneath my fingers. I want my hand to be the one held firmly against the back of a child, while she stands and teeters on the edge of this world the way it really is. The hand that helps her to resolve fears and remember hope. Hope that shows in the strong and striking faces of the people of Butte. Hope that flows from their hands, as they squeeze their lovers shoulders, grab their own children's hands, or embrace the living of this day, with all the memory of fury, joy and stories still untold.

Totem Hunt VI

I have not been on this trail before but I am comfortable. I am home, even more so knowing that the others with me have not seen Montana before. Fragments of tension surrounding the burn seep through my pores and cause me to pause, almost slowed by the thickness of passion enveloping this place. Maybe it is this very sense that allowed me to see it. I'd never ever seen it before, not even in my field guide, but there it was, a shadow in the hillside, a figure asking not to be noticed, even though its beauty was undeniable. Mission Bell. Leopard Lily. Fragile Incognito. Single deep green stalk poking out of the charred and littered slope, like a thin blade of grass. A satellite cup of a flower, the back of it smooth and shiny like a bald head, looking down and away from me at the valley in front of us. Deep maroon skin, speckled with dull green yellow, mottled, splattered. The face, a wide teacup more vividly speckled with a sparse cluster of stamen reaching out. This is not a flower that I will pick. I am content to find it here in this moment. Pressing it would steal the inviting force of its depth and dimension, its very essence of rebirth out of fire. It is a symbol of recovery, cycle, and resilience. It grows out of blackness, dryness, painted suffering and resilience.

The Memory of Rain

Montana is a place that knows wildfire. The power of it sticks to people's minds, like the smoke sticks to everything in the valley. A fiery haze reduces trees to hunched shadows, making them unfamiliar forms in a place we thought we knew.

* *

I was living in Big Sky, Montana, when the fires of 2000 began to consume the clearness of summer days and distract most western Montanans from their normal routines. I knew that place, but I didn't know fire and I had no idea that it would become a marker in my life for motion, memory and lessons learned. After earning my Bachelor's degree, I had moved to the Gallatin Valley, wishing only to tangle myself up in the beauty of the landscape and take a little time to figure out what would be next. I ended up tangled in more than just a landscape and remained there for several years, marooned, caught between my passion for the place and my desire to succeed at love. It was a lonely place, even with many friends and a supposed lover. There was no sense of community. Resorts are such transient settlements, people coming and going with the abrupt changes of season. Vacation homes (of which Big Sky was primarily composed) stood vacant all but two weeks out of the year. Creative people never came together to share ideas; we hid in our respective dens, coddling inspiration. You could know a person as a painter (and define them in such a way) but not describe their work, never having seen it. By 2000, I was aware that a different place and kind of stimulation would allow me to grow and expand.

Lurking on the edge of all those feelings was a memory of where I had been before: a time when I felt so alone that there was no way to see all the possibilities that lay before me. Nineteen wasn't the beginning of an adult life, it was an ending, and it was

terror at surviving on my own. Every thought was weighted with the prospect of dying. At the time, dying seemed much easier than being totally self-sufficient, and facing the penetrating anger and hurt that welled up within me every time my father made another attempt to rejoin me in my life. I had no desire to return to those feelings. There were several years and many resolutions between that time and Montana, but still it lurked on the edges of every choice that Imade.

With that knowledge, and the final unraveling of my love affair, the decision to move was easy. It was time to find the place where my writing and environmental goals were accessible. Missoula was a community where my senses would actually be able to absorb and process the intensity of the landscape that I so deeply loved, a place to step forward again.

The fires and the power that they held over everyone were an acute reminder of my smallness in this world, but also a force that propelled me to make my move without looking back. Fire and I wiped out the briars and brambles, the old things that held us in place too long. Fire reminded me that change was inevitable and not always in my hands. Fire was that force that shed light on some things that I had tucked away and ignored for too long, and it reminded me that there were possibilities beyond knowing. In it, I recognized duality when the light it gave became smoke that concealed our faces from each other, threatening to disrupt the solidarity of the bonds we had forged in this landscape. It kept lovers from reading each other's gaze. Fire helped to shield my own expression when I said goodbye to the man I had loved earnestly for too long.

The fire was my cohort; the best way make a change at that particular time, and while the fires of that summer were something that I needed, that time has passed and I am thirsty. We all want water. The mountains and valleys are thirsty. It is time for a different kind of rejuvenation.

During Missoula winters, we find it easy to devour sunshine. It makes people silly and chipper, energizes our weary limbs. We get gluttonous about it when the short cloudy days are upon us. We welcome the sun, but beneath our hunger for warm clear days, there is this thirst brought on by the wariness and distrust directed at the uncommon nature of sunshine in winter or 100+ degree days in summer. We want water.

Now in 2003, the fires are back. On one day in Missoula, you could look in any direction from downtown and see pillars of smoke and even flames surging up from the mountains. Then everything went gray for weeks. There were no mountains around us, no stars at night. We all skulked around sharing headaches and fatigue, fear and hope. Hope for cooler weather, hope for the safety of our neighbors, hope for rain. No matter how much water we drank, our throats were still sore and scratchy; only rain could quench this thirst. Gluttony for sunshine easily succumbs to rain ands snow, when the heat of fire still lingers in the uneasiness of our dreams.

To look back over the rolling landscape of my life, is to marvel at how elemental forces mark each passage. I feel the need for water again, to keep the motion of my life fluid, to make it grow. This thirst is familiar. Its origin lies in Kenya, where I first came to love the rain.

A semester abroad in East Africa set twenty drastically apart from nineteen. Suffering from severe depression, my inner landscape had been an endless tornado of

confusion and self-loathing. I did not know how to forgive my father for his disease (bipolar disorder), a disease that he let rule him, a disease that ruled our family. He was a disruption in my life then, someone who brought only doubt and pain to a time that was already full of uncertainty.

Yet in returning to school and planning for Africa, I found myself on a road to recovery. I had begun to take initiative, by forcing myself to walk everyday, eat good food, and sleep enough. These were basic skills, but they needed to be relearned. I began to dream again.

There were twenty-seven students in the St. Lawrence University Kenya program that semester. On October seventeenth, 1994 we left Nairobi and traveled north, beyond Mt. Kenya, to the East Central part of the country. There we began the Samburu component of our semester. We met up with a clan of elders who took us on as their children and began to teach us about the pastoralist way of life.

The "elders" were married men between the ages of thirty and forty, men who kept herds of cattle, sheep and goats. They were quick to smile and openly affectionate, as is the disposition of most Kenyans I have met. We followed them around for weeks, learning about the plants they used for medicine and food, the age structure of the Samburu tribe, the roles of each individual within their families, and how they moved with the comings and goings of rain. We all cooked together and watched stillness crawl over the land at twilight. Then they took us to Mount Nyiru, because God lives on every mountain.

During the dry season, a woman prophetess came to the elders on the slopes of the mountain. She said, "You have thrown away our customs, you have stopped praying and

now we have seen drought, fire and flood. Please hear me, God will kill you if you don't see this devastation. Start praying again. Hear me, I will give you blessings if you pray now. Call the women together. They will wear blue. They will pray and sing for survival. They will sing for rain."

When we started to ascend Mt. Nyiru, word of the woman's prophecy reached us. The elders told us that on the Twelfth Day of the moon, twelve women would arrive at the top of the mountain and bless a household there, in the name of all the people of the earth. They would ask God for protection. They would wear traditional skins of blue. Red is a significant and powerful color for the Samburu, but the women would not wear it on this day, because they did not want to confuse God. Red is the color of blood, war, and anger. Women would carry out this ceremony because they carry on generations; they are closer to God and have more power in this prayer for protection. The elders said to us, " The women can restore our land, it is true, we pray to be restored. The women will be repaid for their blessings by eating cattle. Every month of rain, the women sing and pray."

It occurred to me that as we had been traveling to the base of Mt. Nyiru, the women had been dancing and praying each day, ascending the mountain and visiting their neighbors. In two day's time, on the Twelfth Day of the Moon, we would meet these women and participate in their ceremony.

The upper reaches of Ol donyo Nyiru were dense and heavy with moisture. The dry plains faded from us and we climbed more slowly, in the sticky air. Trees were draped in moss of fluorescent and inky green. Marani and elders alike gathered around my friend Alison as she clutched my hand and tried to breathe through an asthma attack.

The women danced somewhere on the mountain. It is easy to assume that the mountain was sacred to the Samburu because it brought them physically close to God or our idea of where God resides, but being there, it became apparent that this was a place of God because it was drenched with blessings. It contained the source of life. Water was infused in every lush inch of it.

On the morning of the blessing ceremony, we took our time waking up, unlike the previous days in Samburu. Our fathers made uji (porridge) and chai. They sat on logs under the trees and talked quietly, occasionally erupting in laughter that was absorbed by the forest and the fog. I lay in my tent for awhile after waking and listened to their chorus grow steadily louder, as other students emerged from the tents and water dripped from the trees. My marani friend unzipped the tent when he heard my rustling and peeked in, balancing himself on his spear. "Good afternoon twiga (giraffe)," he said in his musical English. He laughed and his smile seemed to dissipate the darkness that I felt lingering around me in the rainy weather. That uneasiness, often felt in mornings, calling me back to the sad places of my past, vanished as he stood and walked over to pour me a cup of chai. I groaned and pushed my hair out of my face, then wove it into braids. It had taken on a gentle curl in this place of clouds. I laughed, realizing that this is how my Samburu companions would remember me, different than I had ever been.

Once everyone was up and had eaten, we began our walk to the boma (household) that was chosen for blessing. The elders told us that this was Samakata Seremai--"The path of the people of the earth." We stumbled out of the trees into a grassy meadow nestled between two bomas and looked around, wondering if this was the place; the elders letting us tag along as usual, without an excess of explanation. Our voices could

carry in this place, but we were all listening for a song that we wouldn't recognize. Flashes of sunlight and blue sky warmed our damp skin.

In a few moments we were at the boma, all of the students standing nervously together. The elders stepped inside the knarled mass of sticks that created a fence around the household, and they spoke with the people who lived there. Then we were welcomed and we sat in the grass just outside the enclosure. Children gathered around, their alert little eyes watching us. They would come close to us and raise their hands to their mouths, giggling, then run away. A small herd of baby goats cavorted amongst our group, chewing on our kangas (wrap skirts) and backpacks. A chorus of giggles rippled through us when they went after my braids and then made off with someone's sandals.

I lay on my back in the cool smooth grass and stared at the sky. Conversation around me was subdued, and it faded in and out of my thoughts like the smell of a cooking fire. When would the women get there? What would we do? Would we alter this event or break a tradition? Would the women be as welcoming as the elders? Even in this uncertainty, I couldn't help but submit to a feeling of absolute belonging and normalcy. How could something so totally new feel so complete?

Lunchtime came and went. We waited. I shared my sandwich with a little girl in a dark blue kanga. Over the top of her peanut butter and jelly, her deep brown eyes watched me. She laughed when I winked at her between bites.

We pulled out our ndotoi boards and began playing. The game consisted of trying to acquire your opponent's rocks by landing your own rocks in the space opposite them. The rocks represent cattle, which in Samburu culture are wealth and prestige. However, there is a strong sense of community among the Samburu. They view all

people in connection to one another and the earth. As a result, they look out for each other. In the context of the game, that translates to never leaving your opponent totally empty-handed. Once you know that you've won, you leave it at that. You leave their last cattle on the board.

The mood became festive and amusing. I sat across from a marani, with five elders around me, telling me what move to make, so the warrior couldn't take our cattle. One of them would reach from behind me with his long fingers and make a move. Before there was time to think about it, another one would jump and undo the move. They bantered back and forth, laughing the whole time, smirking at me if I chose to make my own decision.

Eventually, through the laughter, a song filtered in. Our voices would rise and subside like waves, and the song cradled itself in the lull of the conversations. Some of us became distracted from the games, but the elders just played on, and kept joking. Finally, the song grew close enough to grab our full attention. We all settled, and sat, breathing softly.

The children gathered together again and ran down the hill, out of sight. For seconds nothing stirred, except for the breeze that brought the women's song to us. A child stumbled out of the bushes and then turned and disappeared again when he realized that he was ahead of the women. Finally, they emerged in a tight group, shoulder to shoulder. They wore rich blue skins. Traditional beadwork brightly adorned their necks. They swished and moved like the mountain grasses, shaking bundles of greens in their hands or carrying wooden poles with foliage twisting from the ends of them. The women sang and moved forward, paused, and continued to pray. Sing, dance, pray. When they

reached the entrance of the boma, some of the elders and local women joined them in song. Then they beckoned us to them. As we all came together, the song rose and surged through us. Our feet slid across the earth and moved together. Dark, light, toes, heels.

The women danced in the front of the group and as our song intensified, they poured milk and blood from their calabashes into their hands and flung it over their shoulders, blessing us. I turned my face to the sky and tasted sweetness on the air. Then I bowed my head, to watch the swirl of color and motion all around me. Milk painted veins on the feet of the Samburu men. Blood speckled my shoulders and stained my pale skin.

In that moment, lightness rose up from within me. My shoulders pressed back and I stood taller. My own voice melded with the voices of the Samburu, and I felt the deep cadence of our song climb through me, pulsing in my every pore. Suddenly, the colors brightly contrasted each other. Shapes were more distinct against the sky. The Boma became a living vessel of succulent green. Light transformed trees into guardians and puddles strewn across the meadows. Clouds raced by us overhead. A crispness cut through everything. I was awake.

The next day, we left Mt. Nyiru and returned to the lowlands, to live with the families of our elders. Before splitting off and going to separate homes, we camped for several days at the base of a small mountain. Rain came. At any given moment, in any direction, a rainbow would appear. Full arc, spanning the sky. Drops of water glistened on the air, and mist whispered across the skin on my face.

The elders stood around wrapped in their red blankets, holding umbrellas over their heads and spears in their other hands. They laughed along with us and teased us for

making such a fuss over the rainbows. We took off our shoes and sloshed around in the mud. The girls painted cryptic figures on each other's limbs with the slick, dark earth. The designs dried swiftly on our arms. My skin soaked up the moisture so quickly; it was like my body could not get enough. I could not get enough of each moment in the rain. There was no place for me to hide in Africa, and no reason to. For the first time in years, I wanted to be seen.

When we left Samburu, there was finality in the condition of our good-byes. I did not want to leave my Samburu fathers. They had brought genuine joy to my life. They had called me into an old kind of wisdom, and it was a comfortable place. It was scary to think that some things might be forgotten. There was security in the sound of the women on the wind, in the sound of raindrops hitting and soaking into earth, into my skin.

* *

The power of those moments lingered on the very edge of my consciousness for many years, and eventually they sunk below the surface of my skin. At times they rushed through me, as I walked through the woods of Vermont on a rainy fall day, or saw a flash of lightning touching down in the open mountainsides of the Gallatin Valley. They resonate more strongly since the fires of 2000, as if the rains fall with more force now, or with more urgency. In the springtime, I press my nose deep into the quick of blooming flowers, just after a rain. Their petals cling to my nose and their scent soothes me, calling me back to the desert where we witnessed the power of the prayers we made in Samburu.

* *

A small group of us were on a field course together with the director of our program and another professor from our university. The lorry was packed and we set off

across the desert on our final journey of the semester, to the northernmost part of Kenya. We began to cross the Chalbi desert in order to reach our destination. We sang and laughed in the open air, leaning back to back against each other in the truck.

It had been raining a lot in the past few weeks. As we traveled further into remote areas, we noticed a dampness in the sand. It would rain, clear, a rainbow would come and it would rain again. The truck labored in the sandy roadway. Mini flash floods crossed behind us, wiping out our tire tracks. We were following the tracks of two land rovers into the depths of the desert.

We got stuck. Everyone piled out and we pulled a long metal runner from the back of the lorry, shoved it under the wheel and pushed. Then we were moving again.

Driving on, we watched lightning in the distance, white purple against the dark, voluminous clouds. We got stuck again. We decided to make a game out of it. Our spirits remained elevated and light. We were elated; what we had prayed for had come to pass. We refused to sink into the desert with the truck. After we pushed the truck out, we took turns stepping down into the hole it had made and watching as brown water crept up our legs, almost reaching some of us at the hip.

However, the third time we got stuck, the mood changed. Uneasiness pulsed through each of us when we discovered that the reserve water tank had not been filled during preparation for the trip. We were too short on water, in the midst of all the rain and we would have to spend the night in the desert, where bandits were known to conspire in the darkness. We nibbled on chapatis and murmured to each other as the sun dropped on the horizon. Our tents were set up in a tight little group, and my companions

scolded me for even thinking about sleeping outside. I had become accustomed to feeling the vastness of the African sky wrap itself around me.

Morning came quickly. The pink and orange sky pressed in on my tent, and the sound of a fish-eagle echoed overhead. The Southern Cross faded into daylight behind the silhouettes of my companions drinking chai under an acacia tree.

We gathered and prepared to give the journey another shot. Moving on, the air became thicker. We all found ourselves dozing. All of a sudden, the lorry's engine cut out and we glided to a stop. I looked out across the desert and my mouth dropped open. "You guys....LOOK." I whispered. Ten reticulated giraffe stood in front of us, just a few feet away. Orange blossoms trembled and fell at their feet as they tugged and browsed on the acacia trees.

Then the passenger side door opened on the truck, and the twigas jumped and pranced. They turned and ran, retreating in a wave across the desert sands. Their motion was slow and wild, an unexpected form of grace.

A pungent aroma clung to the air. It smelled so sweet that it was almost rotten. The desert was in full bloom; a thick and heavy sedation carried on the scent of hurried flowers.

We all jumped down off the truck and felt ourselves ooze into the earth. A realization hung over us like the heat and precipitation that hung in the air. The two tracks that we had been following actually belonged to one land rover. We had reached the point where the vehicle had stopped and turned around. If a little land rover couldn't make it, there was no way our big truck could. We would just be driving deeper into trouble. With certainty and resignation we decided to turn back.

I was sad that we wouldn't reach our destination, but knew that this was the embodiment of the wisdom that we had been seeking and acquiring in the past four months. Nature always makes the call. It felt right and powerful, as if I had swallowed the vivacity of Kenya and there was no room left for sadness, anger, or desperation.

We left the desert and traveled south for two days, arriving in Samburu in the midst of a sunny morning. Children ran up to the truck as we came to a stop. They reached up and grabbed our hands, their high voices making us laugh and yell. We lounged around in the grass all day, waiting for word to get to our fathers about our arrival. I flirted with a grumpy camel and tried to get him to kiss me, but he just wanted to bite my face. We danced with the little girls, and marveled at how inept we were in learning their dance and how quickly they imitated our own sloppy rhythms. A Samburu mother called the calves in for milking while children tangled themselves up in her kanga, and her cocoa brown skin glowed in the sun.

The grass was high and vibrant. The cattle and sheep were fat. Even more song filled the air. People laughed and danced with the mere motion of walking up to greet one another. I did not think that the Samburu could become any more vital and dynamic than when we had first come to know each other. Times were good and the Samburu sense of fulfillment was contagious. It was a one in twenty year rain.

We feasted on goat and wali (rice) that evening, then slept lightly on cowskins, surrounded by children and the sound of rain. In the morning, we gathered outside a hut where a woman was giving birth. Many women ducked in and out of the doorway, scolding the men for getting in the way or sending children off to retrieve some necessity.

Eventually we heard a cry break the hush of expectation, and everyone stirred, breaking up and out into the day with the news of a new life in Samburu.

We lingered in the afternoon, and chatted with the elders. We talked about the change coming upon Samburu. Outsiders wanted the land to farm. Young people moved to the cities and forgot how to move with the seasons, following rain and allowing the land to rejuvenate.

It came time for us to go, and we climbed in the lorry and started the engine. Leshomo, my Samburu father, strode up to the truck with his long legs and extended his hand. I reached down and grasped my palm to his, "It is so good to see you," I said in Swahili. "It is wonderful to see you too dedai (daughter)," he responded. A flash of comfort returned to me, remembering the night that we sat outside the hut of his first wife, with our backs against the wood and solidified earth. The sky was laden with stars on that evening and we watched them streak and burn out into the darkness.

We let go and Leshomo stood with his palm in the air, smiling as we drove away. There was a sense of things ending, but unlike the first time leaving Samburu, I was ready. I could go home without going back to the way things were.

* *

My first love affair was with the sun. Naturally it was the heat of Africa and the fire of its light that initially drew me there, but beyond that I felt a sense of raw bare-boneness that existed in my mind long before I could identify it. That was what truly called me to the place. However, it was the rain that changed me there.

Outside in the afternoon, the darkness makes my footsteps heavy. We are sleepwalking in this smoke, wandering out into what seems more like a dreamscape than

the landscape we know. The smoke is leaden today, as if the dry earth is trying to make it into moisture, trying to quench its own thirst. I pluck a sun gold tomato from its vine in the garden and squash it on my tongue, sucking the juice out and down my throat. Something splats against my shoulder and it is dismissed without even a glance in the possible direction of its origin. Then a sparse chorus of splatters makes the wide green leaves of our zucchini plants tremble. Rolling my head back, face to the invisible sky, I close my eyes and wait, cautious, trying to assume nothing. Rain. It washes across my cheeks and travels down my sternum, between my breasts, soaking my belly and hips. Rain, and it smells like things growing, before we smell the fire smoldering. It rains all night, for one night, and the next day we see the mountains and the sun. The next day we all smile, and look each other straight in the eyes. We can still see smoke, but it is not all that we see.

There is a time to cherish the sun and wallow in it, yet it is the rainy days that bring me back to earth and strip me down. They make me remember where I came from, but even more so, remember where I discovered my drive to savor each day. The color and spirit of my Samburu family erupts in the mingling of the elements that guide me. It took fire to make me move and call me back to the virtues of rain. Yet it is still the voices of the women that lull me to sleep on restless nights and it is the open gaze of people in this town that brings me home. Now, when I watch the clouds swell and push over the mountains of Montana, I know that I have never been alone.

Totem Hunt VII

I do not know its name
        But I roll it across my lips and tongue
                In place of naming
In its fiber mixed with spit
        I taste the chill of evening
                Rising from river
A high quiet creek
        Calling down the night
                Like memory whispers me to waking

The Color of Wisdom

Bugs Bunny would hate my garden this year. No carrots. We planted them, but nothing happened. The soil is too compacted, and this far corner in the garden gets less sun than it used to. Plenty of other things grew, like Japanese eggplant, pole beans, tomatoes (early girl and sun-golds); even a few peppers made an appearance. Of course, all of that flourished in the new raised beds. I just assumed that the carrots would grow anywhere. But not so, there are no feathery green tops to tickle the kneecaps. No taste of cool autumn to mark summer's passing.

Two years ago, the first year of this garden, carrots were harvested into November. They were small knubby carrots, textured like the crinkly flesh of my grandfather's knuckles, but carrots just the same. A first solo attempt at growing them. My patience is a fickle thing, and it has no room for thinning carrots, or planting the molecular sized seeds with ideal spacing in mind. Last year, even with little time on my hands, the carrots grew. But last summer was a milder season. This summer, there is more time than before, but it is spent on more endeavors and the heat is ruthless. The carrots have been taken for granted. Reluctantly, I call this garden, a garden. My mother would press the back of her hand to her forehead and deliver a Shakespearean sigh, "Alas, what is a garden without carrots?"

Like Thoreau's beans, my carrots "attach me to the earth," more than other things that I love to grow. His daily toil was "making the earth say beans instead of grass." Standing at the edge of this failed carrot patch, the earth says, "You're a lousy excuse for a gardener!"

There have been times in my life, when the wheelbarrow was a cornucopia's vessel of carrots. But then again, growing them wasn't a solo endeavor, and sometimes

my hands only touched the harvest. Even so, there was some kind of knowledge imparted then, a knowledge that has brought me to this garden, my garden, where the earth says, "and another thing, you haven't learned enough to be a lazy gardener!" "Lazy gardeners" are those who have earned the time to sit and watch things grow. They have seenthe sun move across the ground through seasons. They have added slowly and carefully to a plot, using little nuggets of wisdom that they gather over the years. Until one day, there is a garden, a beautiful replete and colorful garden that produces every year. A garden that contains endless days of labor and toil, a garden that embodies contentment for the gardener. Finally, they can sit back and marvel at what they have had a hand in growing, and their hands still touch that earth, but less as an act of hungrily seeking knowledge and more as an act of partaking in creation. Sometimes you have to remember what it is that you've learned, not just go through the motions of knowing something.

* *

The soil, like midnight, sifted through my fingers. Slightly damp, it felt heavy and cool. Myra's pitchfork plunged into the grass-covered mound in front of me and I crawled forward, digging my knees into the dirt. Swiftly, I pulled the greens out of the freshly turned ground, squeezing the clumps of soil and breaking them apart, searching for the golden treasures hidden away in the darkness. They tumbled out one or two at a time. We counted them, our voices rising with the numbers. Then we tossed them aside, sorting them along the way, leaving a trail of potatoes behind us, glowing in the field. It was a sunless day, thick and overcome with clouds. The potatoes made up for the lack of

light and warmth as we pulled them from the ground. It was an endless fall day and we worked the land, as if born from the soil itself.

Birdsfoot was an organic commune in rural upstate New York, about ten miles from St. Lawrence University. I had started volunteering there, feeling a bit trapped by academia. One class, offered only in the fall, stood between a degree and me. Thus, I was looking for a way to spend my time outside of school. Birdsfoot was my first true exposure to communal living, although I did not live there. The plan was to help with the harvest at least two afternoons a week. Being there felt like a long slow breath finally reaching the depths of my lungs.

Myra's pitchfork turned over a mound of fingerlings. We were now onto another variety. We squinted our eyes and looked harder at the soil, because the potatoes were dark purple, as deep as blood, and they were small. She started singing an old folk song from her homeland in Germany, and her son, who had been sitting in the small trench next to us, giggled and bobbed around. His rosy cheeks reminded me of the cupie doll that my Aunt gave to me when I was six. I offered to switch places with Myra and use the pitchfork for a while, but she smiled and said in her thick accent, " No, this is OK, I wouldn't want you to wear your back out, you are such a small girl."

The folks who lived at Birdsfoot all came from different, somehow unlikely places, yet there they had come together to live and depend on each other. They were part of something rare. The satisfaction I found in my labor could have been nothing compared to what they experienced. They had all plopped the seeds and starters in the ground, that thud of stone hitting soil, echoing in their dreams for months after. They worked hard all the time. For me, this was a time of release, recreational gardening, the

kind I had grown up with. We grew a lot of food in Vermont, and it certainly helped us to survive the struggling economy of the state, but it wasn't our only source of survival.

Myra asked me if I had a partner and I spilled out a feeble response. "Well, there is someone, I just met him, but I'm leaving soon." What struck me was her choice of words in asking that question. I had dreamed of having a companion and lover, and I believed that I had just met my kindred spirit, but I knew that I wasn't ready to be a partner, nor would I find one at that time. Myra knew the meaning of her word intimately, for not only was she in a marriage and raising a child, she was living with a group of people, leading a life that was not always easy, although its philosophy was based on simplicity. It was a life that could strain a relationship lacking in a fundamental foundation. I felt young responding to her question, and artless. She saw the color come rushing into my cheeks, and she smiled her boundless smile, " So, it's love then?" I laughed and said, "For now," at least acknowledging the fickleness of my place in life.

I felt sturdy digging potatoes that day and let my mind wander to the West and to New Zealand and back to Africa. A small home with a green house and garden built itself in the corner of my thoughts. It distracted me from conversation and that was just fine with Myra. She was accustomed to letting the farm speak and her own thoughts move to the next task at hand or the joy of her own small son. She was living her dream. I could tell by the way the health of it illuminated her eyes.

Pedaling the bike slowly home that night, thoughts kept returning to Myra and her son. Dusk slid into my consciousness and my mood slipped into a darker place. I wondered if Andy, my new wild love, would one day father my child, and if he would want to live a life like Myra's or if we would go our separate ways. I showered and

scrubbed the mud from my feet, then pulled a dress over my head. Before the fabric covered my skin, I caught a glimpse of my flat, unmarked belly and for a moment I felt empty and naïve.

One afternoon, shortly thereafter, I came barreling into the main house at Birdsfoot, just fired up because my psychology professor had brought two apples into class that day. One was red and shiny, all polished up. The other was yellow and bruised, blemished in places. The class giggled when he said the yellow one was from his tree, it was his lunch, and it would be good. He got the red apple at the super market and boy, was it pretty; you could see your reflection in it. We didn't know where it was from or how it got that way. It was surprising that he was taking the time to make such a point in a psychology class. It excited me so much that I wanted to tell someone.

Doug, the founder of Birdsfoot, sat in the book room, his bare feet propped up on the worn wooden table and his tattered old work pants all bunched up at his knees. His long blond hair was disheveled as usual. He scratched at the hand-crocheted faded rainbow hat that was a permanent fixture on his head. Doug never wore socks. Every time I saw him, my feet got cold. Upon greeting each other, I started rambling on about what my teacher had done. Doug stared at me with polite interest and a slight smile on his face. I told him that I was so happy to finally be learning more about agriculture because it made me feel more connected and aware of what I was putting in my body. He looked sternly at me and said, " It's Horticulture, Danielle." My eyes traced the cracks in the planks of the floor. I bit my lip and thought, "I don't know anything." He must have noticed my deflation, so he laughed and told me go ahead and find Rob out in the barn.

Each resident at Birdsfoot had hands that were tough and dirty. Their laughter lingered longer in the air. They were kind and open-minded, the kind of people I wanted to be, not just farmers, but seekers of the spirit, custodians of the land and teachers. I was most comfortable with Rob. I always noticed his almost pointy ears and very sparkly eyes. He was the one who taught me the most when I was there and we often worked out in the fields together, when everyone else had other business to attend to. We decided to pull carrots that day, because they were getting ahead of us and beginning to crowd each other.

Not long after we started working, Rob's little daughter snuck down through the carrot patch, and popped up right next to him with an exuberant, "Hi Daddy!" Patricia, Rob's wife, was not far behind and she laughed her greeting to us as Rob tossed their daughter into the air in a whirl of delightful shrieks.

I watched them and missed Andy. We hadn't seen much of each other recently. He was busy with his paintings, getting ready for the student art show. So I busied myself with the farm and tried to find him in the land, because after all, he had been raised on the same soil, never having left home for too long and still content there until he finished school. I had been to Africa and France and away from home for sometime already. I was ready to go. There was much more to explore and restlessness ruled my dreams. Rob could tell I was preoccupied and he tried to draw me out with conversation.

We talked about Farmer's Market, where he worked, every other Wednesday. Market was a pretty popular thing with the townspeople, as well as the college students. Rob was laughing at himself because it was about the only place he went on a regular basis. He said his dance card was full. He had many wonderful friends and his own

home and family. He felt fulfilled. I told him that I wanted that. He looked at me with a bunch of carrots in his hand, the greens draped over his knee, as he crouched above the ground, "You can do anything," he said, "but you have time to learn about this world. Use the tools it gives you, so that you can change it if you want and protect what you build for yourself."

Rob had traveled a lot in his younger years. He had strapped himself to an old-growth tree in Oregon once, for four days, so it wouldn't get cut down. He made a point of telling me that he had voted in every election since he turned eighteen. He could see the fear in my face, and he smiled then and said, " Love follows you to the place where you put your soul and helps you make it your own."

The sky was, of course, in its gray slumber all day, and I wasn't the least surprised when a light mist started to fall. I had grown accustomed to all the rain there, but had forgotten how to love it until that day we spent in the carrots. It only made the earth darker and the carrots brighter. We filled two carts before we decided to stop. I was chilly, and my back hurt, so I was happy to stand and stretch and get my legs moving again. I pushed a cart down the path to the barn, behind Rob, who went to fetch the hose as soon as we got there. My enthusiasm for this new task wavered when the hose began to run. It spit out ice cold water onto my hands as we scrubbed the carrots clean. My back continued to ache and my toes got sore. My urge was to run into the kitchen and stand by the stove while Myra baked bread, but I thought, I'm not that miserable and I don't do this everyday. Rob does, and Myra does, and they need to make sure that they will make it through the next barren winter in the North Country.

Then Andy was in my head. He had grown up in that place, but did he know how this felt? I focused on the carrots, smeared with black earth, and as we scrubbed them, they glowed. The dirt would rub off in the frigid water, and there would be this warming vibrance beneath it. They were little beacons of life, bringing sunlight into a rainy day and putting fire in my belly. I looked at Rob and said that I didn't believe I had ever seen that shade of orange, and he laughed with a twinkle in his eye. I was beginning to believe that if I ate more carrots, I could change the world. Maybe it was hypothermia setting in, but I never was a big fan of the carrot until that day, and I've never tasted such a remarkable carrot since.

I was dreaming of those carrots on the first of November, when I woke up next to Andy and looked outside. The ground was christened early in the dawn light by a heavy frost. Contentment was the feel of my skin brushing against his warmth. It was easy to learn all kinds of things about Andy, some because I asked, some because I looked long and hard. I wanted to know where his drawings and paintings came from. I wanted to stir up that calm demeanor, make him move. I wanted to know if he would dig his long artist fingers into the soil and make it grow carrots.

With him, I felt wise, and vast. At the farm, without him, I would look out over the rolling green fields and down the rows of crops, and realize that I was a small woman and still had much to learn.

The frost didn't melt off until late that day, so Rob and I didn't get out until about four o'clock. I was feeling sad, because the semester would fly by from that point on. It felt too soon for leaving. I didn't know what Rob had planned, so I just aimlessly followed him past the burdock and broccoli and even past the bedded down spinach patch

and the pumpkin patch. Never having been that far out in the fields before, my curiosity was beginning to pull me out of my barren mood.

We came over a small hill and looked down on the most beautiful patch of sunflowers. They had survived the frost, with startling sturdiness and height. The farther we walked down into the patch, the tinier I felt. Rob disappeared in front of me, and only the rustling of his steps as he brushed against the stiff brown leaves allowed me to follow him. The yellow flowers were smaller than the typical sunflower and they peered down on me as I studied their contrast against the crystal blue sky. I thought that we were going to clip them for market, before the next frost knocked them out. We came to a clearing of trampled stalks and flowers. Rob turned around and said, "These are SunChokes or Jerusalem artichokes, as we call them in the supermarket. We're going to harvest their roots. They are ntamu sana." He was using the little bit of Swahili that I had taught him over the past weeks.

Rob handed me a shovel. We made a circle about six inches from the bottom of the plant and then dug gingerly below the root base in order to avoid breaking the chokes. I awkwardly harvested my first few plants and looked up to see that Rob had dug twice as many and was moving with total grace and efficiency. He turned to me and said, "It's funny how the most obvious and attractive part isn't always the most useful to us, isn't it? Remember that. I know you are full of dreams, and I want you to stay rooted in them and I want you to flourish in this crazy world." He grabbed a fresh sun choke and rubbed the dirt off of it, tossing it to me for a taste. It snapped like a parsnip in my teeth. I was surprised by its sweet earthy flavor.

It was eight years ago that I spent my afternoons digging crops in the North Country. When I left there, it was to head west with a feeling that the world was mine, having finally finished college. I was torn in two, by my need to have new experiences and my love for Andy, left buried in that fertile soil at Birdsfoot. The wildness of Montana now holds its own lessons, yet often, I look at my hands and they are too clean. Where are the calluses and why isn't there dirt under my nails? There is age in these hands, but they are not weathered. Most of the food I eat comes from a supermarket. Sometimes it is organic and local, when its affordable and in season.

Now backaches come from carrying trays at the restaurant, where the food is shipped in from somewhere else, not created and nurtured by the hands that serve it. I paint beautiful vibrant vegetables on my friends' dining room chairs, but don't often prepare them for dinner. I am exhausted by trying to pay my bills and feel further away from my dreams than when I was at Birdsfoot. I still want what Rob and Myra have. The ache of loving Andy is now a faded smile between us and a sweet thought of what used to be. He still paints; he just doesn't paint me anymore.

I was making a carrot juice the other day and as I watched the juice pour into the glass, I had an epiphany. For those few moments, I saw a clear path to the realization of my dreams. I was writing to share the wisdom that I had gained while working the land, and I smelled the soil all around me, fresh and pungent, like standing in the middle of the perfect garden. Then I blurted out, "I should really start wearing orange." All of a sudden, I was wide-awake. Sometimes life puts you in a place of sleeping, and waking up can be the most tiresome business. You realize that you have been doing *something*, but you haven't been living that *something*. Or thinking and feeling it.

My garden this year has been like an afterthought, something to squeeze in after breakfast and before work. Sure it produces, but only as much as I give it. Michael Pollan (shouldn't it be Pollen?) talks about the expense of matter. We think logically that when something grows it should deplete the earth and leave an absence of matter, as if next to every melon there should be a hole that it has left from growing. But really it doesn't work that way. He says, "The ancients were entirely correct to regard the harvest's abundance as a gift from the heavens..." A garden grows from very little matter, but I believe that it thrives on labor and spirit. It is energy that it needs more than physical matter and space. My carrots didn't grow because I forgot to breathe when I planted them. I forgot to get dirty, to be there. I forgot that the action of cultivation is empty without the practice behind it. What is the color of wisdom? The earth says, "It's orange, of course, loud, lofty orange!"

Totem Hunt VIII

As a child

I was lured from the house

By the scratchy violin chirp of crickets

In head high grass

Any sound was sweeter than my parents' voices

Riding on a humid tide of anger and despair

It was the wildflowers that held me spellbound

They caught the light of late day

And swallowed it

Into their bodies

Illuminating impossible details

Making the world slide away

Flowers need each other

And butterflies

To propogate

Maybe I make gardens to attract butterflies

Maybe I tattoo flowers and butterflies

On my skin

To attract the real thing

Cultivating Stillness

Snails in the Garden

Slugs ate the Delphiniums

Japanese Beatles ate everything

Cats in the Beans

Ants in the Peonies

Sunflowers in my dreams, everywhere I dreamed

Banana Spiders in the last years

Mama planted Irises

The tigerlilies took over the compost

Bee Balm \ Butterfly Fodder

Some new word for home, rustling in the weeds, where lawn met field.

* *

It is said that the first gardens were places of Gods and Goddesses. They were places in the woods that travelers stumbled upon, open groves overflowing with fruit and flowers. These were gardens where the human and "other" world mingled. A place where all creatures, earthly and celestial alike, were inhabited and enchanted by wildness.

My Italian ancestors embraced the garden and through the centuries, claimed these places of the Gods and Goddesses for themselves. In the ancient Roman gardens, they worshiped Flora, the goddess of flowers, gardens and renewal. By the time of the Italian Renaissance, gardens were integrated into most every aspect of Italian landscape and architecture. Christopher Thacker writes of a man named Leone Battista Alberti, one of the great men of the Italian Renaissance. Alberti advocated a merging of the garden and the villa. "Nature then is brought inside...Alberti is not advocating any wild rush to

the jungle, (*Oh that fearsome jungle*!) for the villa itself extends reciprocally out into the garden." Thacker also writes that there is a fantasy element in gardens of the Italian Renaissance that moves away from Christianity and back to a pagan and hedonistic realm.

As a child in southern Vermont, the only thing I knew of my Italian ancestors was the craving I carried with me: to bury my hands in the hot black soil, and make things grow. I did not know the origin of gardens, or the origin of my father's faith, but I knew that we were gardeners. It had never been any other way.

My father's father (Papa) fled Italy when he was eighteen years old. His homeland, in the foothills of the Italian Alps was becoming a battlefield. He learned that he was on Mussolini's hitlist and quickly found himself the nearest boat to America. I imagine him, a handsome immigrant seeing America for the first time from Ellis Island, his green eyes sparkling, as I always knew them to be. He brought with him his name, Eugene John Lattuga, and a gift for growing that his offspring continue to marvel at and aspire to. It is fitting that we are a family of gardeners, for our last name translates to Lettuce, the very food that, regardless of moral implications, I learned to protect at the ripe old age of seven.

If ever I were to become a sadist, the seeds were planted in that garden of my youth. In the humid Vermont evenings, Dad would send me outside with a salt shaker and tell me to salt every slug I saw, before they devoured the lettuce. Out I went, my blond hair clinging in thin wisps against my temples, feet still dirty from wading in the pond. The golden slugs emerged as the days faded and began to cool. I could see their trails of slime across the grass and up the sides of our raised garden beds into our dense

assortment of romaine, butter leaf and red leaf lettuces. There I found them munching gluttonously, tearing holes in the juicy, deep greenery that was to be my salad. I sprinkled just a few drops of salt upon sighting the leachy beasts and would watch in compelling disgust as their skin melted and the golden flesh was reduced to a mass of slime, shrinking, curling, dying.

Japanese beetle patrol took place in the afternoons, when they clung to the string bean leaves and feasted ravenously in the hot sun. Unlike the slugs, the beetles seemed to wallow in the heat of midday, their iridescent green and black bodies shining like pearls as they tore into the greenery with their spiny jaws. Plink, Plink, splash. I tossed them into a plastic container and buzzed off the fumes of gasoline. Occasionally, one beetle would cling to my finger with its sticky, hairy legs and I would frantically shake it off, its hard body bouncing loudly into the side of the tomb where its cousins already lay, in a mass of disintegrating legs and wings.

It wasn't long before I figured out that I didn't really like performing my father's dirty work. I think the revelation came one fall day at school on the playground when the boys decided to see how far frog guts splattered under the force of both feet. I ran screaming to Mrs. Taxter with amphibious organs stuck to the fine blond hairs on my leg and blood smeared across my kneecaps. I didn't understand why the biggest kid in the class, who always protected me from the bullies, would turn around and kill a frog that was minding his own business, just like me. I can't explain why guts on my leg were any different than slug slime on my conscience, but they were. It was enough and the garden was no longer my battlefield, but still I didn't know it as a place for Gods and Goddesses.

Would Alberti approve of our garden in the lush old mountains of Vermont? It did not lead up to our "villa" nor was it enclosed by anything. It didn't even have a fountain or bench for resting and prayer. We lived at the base of Mount Equinox, a mountain inhabited at the top by monks who built windmills to power their monastery. Deer and black bear walked through our yard and garden as they crossed the valley and headed up the mountain, into a forest of Maples, Birch and Oak. Our little Victorian house was flanked by a small yard , and lilacs bloomed in the spring, lulling my sisters and I to sleep with their heavy aroma.

Dad built the garden in our side yard. My father approached most physical activity with aggression and drama. Building and working in the garden was no different. His olive skin would darken as he dug and grunted, swore and weeded his way through the labor of the season. After turning a raised bed and raking it smooth for planting, he would stand up and wipe his flap of black hair out of his eyes, squinting and frowning at the rolling mountain in front of him. Then he'd rub his scarred hockey knees, grumbling, "Son of a Bitch." My father never seemed to enjoy much of anything.

It would be a flat-out lie to say that I was born into a happy household. By the time I arrived (the youngest of three girls), my parents had their share of marital difficulties, much of it due to my father's struggle with Bipolar Disorder. Living with him was much like living with an alcoholic, erratic, explosive and just plain gloomy. There were times, rare moments, when my father appeared to be happy, almost giddy, and he would pinch my knee and sing to me in a falsetto while we drove downtown to get top soil. What my sisters and I learned later on was that these were manic moments. We watched a psychiatrist draw a straight line on a chalk board, with another line weaving

above and below it. The straight line was a normal person. The wavy line was my dad, his moods and emotions never holding steady. Then the psychiatrist said that my dad spent most of his time below the line. He was depressed. He needed medication and therapy.

We lived in our little Victorian House, which was eternally being remodeled, and I often think that walls came down more as a result of the tension pushing too hard on them, than out of some new floor plan that would increase its livability. We all looked forward to summers, when we could escape and dissipate into the garden and the mountains beyond.

Even as a child, I had a sense that the garden was supposed to be a fun and relaxing thing for all of us. After I realized that ruthlessly murdering garden critters wasn't my forte, I was afraid that I would be excused from garden duty altogether. My father had a somewhat tyrannical presence and although I freely imposed my will against his, I was always wary of the repercussions. He was often frustrated with my responses to the tasks he assigned to me. "NO daddy, I don't want to sweep the porch," or "I'll do it in a minute daddy." He was accustomed to my sisters' easy compliance to his words, but as my mother said, I was born with no fear and an apparent defiance designed specifically for him. I always thought he was bluffing. Sometimes he was. Most of the time, he wasn't. Proof of this lay in the splintered bedroom door that he punched through and the countless broken dishes that lined our trash cans. But somehow, the transition from pest patrol to weeding went smoothly. I even got to plant seedlings in the springtime.

For us, I think, the garden in particular provided an alternative reality. In it, we worked together and created something of beauty and form, something predictable,

controllable and palatable. It was such a vastly different space than the space of our emotional environment. While Mom knelt below the peonies in the front bed, Dad dug, clipped and weeded in the vegetables. They would alternately walk the loaded wheelbarrow down our sloping yard and past the two ancient apple trees, to the humus pile at the back of our lot. I would help Mom pull weeds under the flowers and then stare up at the ants busily weaving in and out of the white and pale pink petals of the peonies. Then I would stand and walk over to the old swing set where the pole beans grew and pluck beans right off the vine. There was a succulent perfection in biting into a fresh bean, crispy crunchy heaven, so distant from my mother's voice in the middle of winter coaxing "Eat your beans honey," while we stared into a plate of canned green mush. Those were peaceful moments for me and I felt close to something, something far from family screaming matches and doors slamming.

Usually in the hot afternoons when Dad was still at work, I would stroll up and down the beds, plucking a weed here or there and then brushing my hands across the tomato leaves and inhaling their herbaceous, minty scent. The tomatoes never seemed to ripen fast enough and Dad loved the cherry tomatoes best. So did I. He would get angry if there weren't any for his salad at night, but they were so irresistible, deep red, warmed from the sun. In defiant joy, I plucked them and tossed them into my mouth, vowing to confess all my sins at church on Sunday.

My father was Roman Catholic (of course), my mother a Baptist. When they married, the deal was that the children had to be raised Catholic. I learned how to be guilty in church. My father was ruled by guilt and imposed it on all of us. But I never felt guilty about the tomatoes really, or about eating the cookies that he hoarded away for

himself. He confused me, because he went to church and told us to pray, but he didn't act like Jesus wanted us to. He didn't share, he didn't treat us like he wanted us to treat him. You'd think he really loved Jesus Christ as many times he shouted out his name. We were the God Damn kids, until Mom finally told him that she didn't name any of her kids God or Damn.

Some evenings, Mom cut the Peonies from the front bed and bunched the stems up in a moist paper towel and tin foil. She handed them to me and told me to run up the street and give them to Maxine. Maxine was the grandmother of my best friend Abi. We spent a lot of time with her, especially when Abi's family moved away. She had been an actress in the twenties and thirties, and still carried herself with elegance. I never ran to her house because partly, the pebbles were too sharp for my bare feet, but mainly because I wanted to bury my nose deep into the ruffly Peony petals and inhale all the sweetness that I could. Sometimes there was a temptation to sneak the flowers for myself, but I loved Maxine, and I would feel guilty for not visiting and making her smile. She would answer the door in a pretty bathrobe, with her hair all done up in white curls. Petals fell from the Peonies as she arranged them in a vase, a few of them stained with her pink lipstick from when she smelled them.

As I grew older, it wasn't just the spoils that made me love the garden. It was my link to solitude. In the mornings, I could sit in the upstairs hallway and stare out the window, watching the cats hunt for field mice among the squash and corn. Sugar, our black and gray tabby, would crouch low and creep forward, ears trained on any scuffle or scurry that she heard. My parents' voices would rise up from the kitchen, but I couldn't hear them, I was listening too hard for the mice in the garden. Sugar would pounce into

the corn and a glass would slam down on the kitchen table. "I don't care what you do anymore." Their voices grew louder, too loud to ignore. "Do something about it, for Christ's sake, instead of laying around with your head under a pillow." I could see nothing but the end of Sugar's tail switching methodically back and forth as she stalked and toyed with the tiny rodents. "Damn it." The front door would slam, making the whole house shudder and Sugar would turn her head for an instant, while I hoped that her prey would make a dash for safety. After stillness settled in the house, it was time to walk outside, scoop Sugar into my arms and hide in the tent of pole beans.

At dinnertime, more often than not, pleasant conversation would explode into some argument, either between my mom and dad, my dad and sister, or all of us. The dining room table was the site where all of our tensions collided, and Dad would remind us of every little thing that made us not good enough. If I wasn't exactly in the line of fire, I would duck out the back door and run into the garden, crawling into the beans. Usually our longhaired orange and white cat, Cinnamon, was lounging in the cool shelter, and I would lie next to her, stroking her electrified fur. The rustle of the beans in the breeze and the subtle glow of the bean blossoms were enough to muffle any sounds coming from the house.

Michael Pollan has a theory that plants have made people into bees. Plant species have evolved to induce bees and other pollinators into spreading their genes. Certain flowers attract certain pollinators. Yellow flowers attract flies, and that is why so many spring flowers are yellow, because flies are the most common pollinators at that time of year. So, who's to say that the gardener is not just another bee? Pollan remarks on how a certain type of spud seduced him with its "knobby charms." He planted that variety of

potato over countless others, hence perpetuationg its genes. If plants have that sort of power over people, what power does a whole garden have? Maybe gardens never stopped being places of Gods and Goddesses. I see what they have done for me. The garden evolved from a battlefield into a shelter away from the battlefield of our house. But then gradually, it became something more.

By the time my parents separated, both my sisters were in college and I was a sophomore in high school. When my father left the house for good, my mother and I found ourselves awkwardly reconstructing some sort of home life. I had become accustomed to making myself scarce and feeling tension surge through my body every time I opened our red storm door and stepped inside. Mom had learned to despise our house for all of its unfinished bathrooms, unpainted trim and broken window sashes. I think she hated it most for sheltering our pain.

The first night after he was gone, we sleepily shoved lean cuisines in the microwave and stood in the sudden stillness of our house waiting for the beeper to go off. When our dinners were ready, we walked past the dining room table and sank into the couch, to watch TV. From that moment on, the dining room table became Mom's "desk," piled high with unopened mail, divorce papers and magazines. It was only cleared in the rare event of company.

Hence we began a slow reclamation of the dreams that we had once dared to inhabit. No longer expending energy on just surviving the climate of our home, we began to thrive, creatively, emotionally, freely. Mom dug up most of the orange tiger lilies that he had planted along the house. "I like them, but not that much." In their place she planted Irises, one of her favorite flowers, because she wanted more purple.

She was content to let the garden lie fallow, but I wasn't. I felt the need to take charge, to make it grow. I spent my mornings in cutoffs and a tank top, hunched over the shovel, sometimes jumping on it with both feet to get far enough underground. I turned each bed with intent on *changing* the soil. Its dense and pungent aroma inhabited my nose each night as I crawled into bed. Sweat pored across my forehead but I never tired. Each turn of the shovel seemed to release something in me, and I often found myself singing under my breath. Never once did I cry.

Instead of the ordered rows that my father insisted on, I went about planting in a much more instinctual manner. I didn't care if the beans and peas shared one side of the swing-set. I let the zucchini and summer squash mingle. I even neglected the diligent pruning that Dad had inflicted upon the tomatoes. In one whole bed, I planted sunflowers of many varieties, Giant Sunflowers, Teddy Bear Sunflowers, Yellow Disc, and Autumn Beauties. And they grew. Everything grew that year.

Mom and I made salads straight from the garden, rinsing them off with the hose. We ate them, sitting on our front porch, watching night creep down the mountainside and lightning bugs flicker in an orchestra of green and yellow.

Despite the overwhelming presence of my father's anger and illness, my life had evolved in that garden. Bits of my childhood conscience resided there and infiltrated its soil. Until that summer, I could not separate him from the garden, but I did not know how to inhabit it alongside him. There was a strong desire to do so, inherent in me all along. That garden was in my blood too. I felt it in the warmth of the soil against my callused feet. It soaked into my skin, dirt and water, tracing the texture and veins in my

hands. With my father gone, so went service at St. Paul's Catholic Church. Sundays were saved for gardening.

In the back corner of the yard, for as long as I could remember, there had been a pile of old bricks and wood. Most of the wood came from inside our house: old window trim that had been discarded, doorframes that no longer had a purpose. Dad would carry them down to that spot and drop them, vowing to take them to the dump one day. He never did.

The first summer after he left I began to clean up that spot. It was a long process, lifting all that junk was tedious. There was just an overwhelming need to get rid of that garbage. It was an eyesore and I had an idea. Every spring, daffodils emerged along the edge of the pile and mom told me that she had planted them there when my parents and sisters first moved into the house. They were bulbs from our old friends the Kinseys who had long since moved to Georgia and sent pressed yellow blossoms of daffodils up every spring, to gloat, of course, that we still had a month of winter yet.

I wanted to make that space beautiful, for my mother, since it wouldn't be long before I was going to leave for college. I thought I could plant enough perennial flowers to fill that space, and the emptier space that she was still learning to reoccupy.

When I started cleaning it up, I was tossing bricks into a pile that would eventually be made into a border for the small garden, and mom came wandering out the back door. She rearranged some pots of zinnias and dahlias on the patio and then strolled across the lawn to me. "It's going to be so nice when it's all done, honey. It already looks better." She smiled and reached out to tuck my hair behind my ear. "You know when we first moved in here, Dad didn't want a garden. I begged him to let me plant

one, and so he cleared out this very space for me. A tiny little corner mostly shaded in this big old yard. I was pregnant with you that summer and these daffodils are the only things left of that labor. Of course a much more important labor took its place." She laughed.

"Mom, how come dad didn't want a garden? I thought he loved gardens."

"He did love gardens. I think he just had to decide that on his own. I think he felt about gardens the same way he did about most things. He had been guilted into keeping them by Papa, and even if they weren't bad, they hadn't been his choice either."

It was exhausting preparing the soil for that little garden. There were tree roots tangled beneath the surface and bits of brick lodged deep in the ground. Still I dug, sometimes using my fingers to loosen the soil around a root or to reach below a stone and pull it up, free from its resting-place. Black soil lodged itself under my nails, but eventually, the plot was ready for planting.

I wanted instant glory in that space, so I invested in perennial plants that were already flowering and tall, bee balm and Echinacea (purple coneflowers), Delphiniums and sun drops. Mom would peek out the kitchen window in the mornings and smile, "That corner of the yard is so much brighter now."

Of course the slugs plotted their long awaited vengeance and targeted the sparkly purple and white blossoms of the delphiniums, but I had declared a truce. This was a place of love and possibility. This was a place of healing where the damp fertility of earth left an indelible mark on me, and I began a journey home.

I did not know then that my Italian ancestors quite possibly were known as Fanarra, Keepers of the Earth Mysteries. In that pagan tradition, they celebrated the

forces of Nature in gardens and feasts, songs and celebrations. Raven Grimassi, the author of Italian Witchcraft, says that many Italian Witches were Masons. My great grandfather Battista was a mason. In these histories, I seek out my own. Is a pagan history the reason for my insatiable desire to garden? Was my family related to Alberti, the man who envisioned the integration of nature with Italian society? Were there Gods and Goddesses in our garden all along, ones I just didn't recognize in me or my father?

Like the gardens of the Italian Renaissance, the gardens of my youth have been changed or lost. My mother has planted her own, in a new house across town from the one we grew up in. I plant my own, in the difficult soil of Montana. Still cultivating questions, still being cultivated by the garden.

Totem Hunt IX

Did they tell you this day is yours?

As if they have claim to the day

Like a mother to child

There is nothing in this world that carries me away from you

Yet I am still mine

Not yours

And you are still smiling

In the breaking of wind

Where trees shift and creak

And flowers cling to earth with all the delicate bones of their fingers

When night comes, it is your voice

Sinking into my hips

And settling across a silence that calls me away

To the stories of my grandmother's heart

She fell in love in a garden

And I fell for you

Low Murmur, Low Song

Listen. Out in the night, I can hear something. My eyes probe the darkness, made darker in places by the hulking silhouettes of the Baobob trees. I can hear something. But I feel it more. The fire is dwindling and hissing in front of us, our feet propped up on the stones that contain it. We have been sharing, he and I, the story of his life. We talk of his father, who died not long ago. I can see how he is shedding his layers. His face softens in the flickering of firelight, as the words peel away. I know that he feels safe in this place with me, and it has taken him a long time to get here. I know that now is a time for listening, a chance for me to step outside of my own head.

Low murmur. Vibrations in my chest, sliding down the backs of my legs and making my toes twitch. It draws nearer, steadily, rhythmically, becoming a conversation. I whisper, "Shhh. I think it's the elephants, wow, listen, where are they?" In the same breath, the darkness moves and shapes emerge. It is the elephants, and they are lumbering towards us. They whisper and hum. I can feel their gentle steps in my gut and my heart. We sit motionless, leaning back with our arms wrapped around our knees, so we can take in all of their hugeness. The matriarch leads her family group. They are all in a line, swaying, across the Savannah, weaving in and out of the shadows. They blend with the hulking shapes of their rooted counterparts, and then emerge, animated, ghostly. Baobob. Elephant. Fiber. Vapor. One, then many. Now I see why people love Tarangire. Elephants pass ten feet in front of us, skirting the other side of our fire. I can see their comical feet glowing in its dwindling light. I stifle a giggle, as I watch the fire tint their toenails red. They tower above us and move with such grace. We dare not shift, for fear of disrupting their midnight stroll. Trunks sway, ears flap gently, fluttering with each

step like a butterfly feeding. They must know that we are here, so close, but this moment, while most everyone is sleeping, belongs to them.

* *

This morning, nine years and mingi (many) miles away from the Elephants of Tarangire, I woke to a story on Montana Public Radio about elephants in Africa. It is time for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to meet once again. CITES deals with illegal trade in endangered, often exotic animal and plant species. There are several African countries that would like to bypass a CITES law regarding trade in African Ivory. Their countries have become so overpopulated with elephants, the local officials claim, that enough die of natural causes to allow surplus Ivory to be obtained legally, without poaching. Certain CITES officials are against bypassing the law, because they believe it will only encourage more poaching. If trade regulations are softened, then poachers will see more potential and opportunity for financial gain. There is currently no system of tracing the source of the Ivory and poachers will capitalize on this fact.

Elephant "overpopulation" was already an issue when I was in Africa, and it arose long before I ever set foot there, but I still balk when I hear the term used. It would be more accurate to say Elephant *concentration* than *overpopulation*. The problems that are being discussed in relation to elephants are not due to an increase in the population of elephants, but more to an increase in human population and an accompanying loss of habitat for the largest land mammals. It is a problem that we see time and again as the world human population increases. We have not found the skill or patience for

cohabitation with species other than our own. It seems to be challenging enough to live with each other.

How do we keep elephants from pilfering our crops and inhibiting our ability to feed ourselves? How do we share resources with animals that can injure us or carry bacteria and parasites into our sole water source? How do we enable the elephants to maintain their vital migration patterns while our population consumes the land around them? Some researchers have established studies in order to explore and ultimately propose solutions to these issues that are raised when living with elephants. One such project involves setting up microphones, in the jungles and Savannah, that record the low vibrations and murmurs of elephant groups, to determine where they are, and in time, determine what they are saying, much like we try to do with whales. Not only will this help us to understand the habitat needs of elephants more clearly, but it could possibly help people to be aware of when and where they might interact with elephants, so that they can prepare for and possibly even prevent tragic incidents. If we learn to listen, there's a chance we might learn to live with them.

The elephants that lumbered past us in Tarangire National Park remain a vivid memory. I think of them more often than I do of my friend who sat next to me and watched as they passed. When I do think of him, I am comforted that he trusted me to listen. He reminded me that everyone feels heartache, and that mine was not so bad, compared to some. I don't know where he is now. I am content with that, but my perspective about the elephants is different. I don't know where they are either, but I doubt their ground is any more stable. Their words are not accessible to me, and my faith in their safety is shaky at best. If I saw my friend again, I trust that we would pick up

where we left off, both having grown and matured. If I saw the elephants again, I could listen as hard as I wanted and still not understand what they were saying. The gap widens.

It took extraordinary circumstances for my friend to communicate his truths and he is not unique in that respect. For humans, typically, we believe that listening is not required for survival. Elephants use sound to communicate over miles. Their very survival, the quality of their lives, depends in large part on their ability to speak and be heard. On their ability to listen.

In 1994, when I visited Tarangire National Park, an elephant researcher there was studying the effects of poaching on elephant migration patterns. He was attempting to address many of the same issues that the scientists in the NPR story were. It appeared that these elephant populations were in a predicament. They were staying in the park for most of the year, because, the theory was, they knew they were safe from the poachers there. The ecosystem of Tarangire could not support all of these elephants year round. They were consuming their niche.

Poachers always take the biggest ivory that they can, meaning the oldest bulls and cows in the populations. Elephant social structure is very delicate, and in Tarangire, there were no elephants above thirty-five years of age. Had they lost their ability to sustain a niche because fear of poaching distracted them, or because they were losing their matriarchal knowledge of migration trails and traditional watering holes? If we could listen to them, would they tell us to stop killing their mothers and stealing their wisdom and history?

One evening in Tarangire, three other women and myself met up with the researcher, Charles, and went seeking the group that he wanted to observe the next day. The sun was beginning to set when we piled in his little Suzuki samurai and sped into the park, cruising over sandy dry riverbeds, past acacia trees and closer to the places of moisture, where wildlife congregated in water and mud holes.

Almost immediately we located two females that Charles knew, Crossroads and Crosstusks. He told us that these two used to confuse him when trying to identify groups, because they were floaters and moved from one group to another. I was struck by how close we came to the sisters, and how at ease they appeared to be. Charles automatically lowered his voice in the presence of them. He spoke softly, pointing to the curving bump of their foreheads and their breasts, as indicators of their gender. He also reminded us that there was constant communication going on between them. We could not hear many of their vocalizations, and that was all the more reason to watch their body language. We joked that they were probably talking about how ugly my dress was, and that it didn't suit my complexion at all. When the wind changed, they lifted their trunks and caught our scents. Although they knew Charles, we were unfamiliar to them, and they began to nod their massive heads in warning. They held their ears out wide and shifted their feet. We decided to pile back in the jeep and move on, driving out into the Savannah.

Crossroads and Crosstusks became acquaintances of mine and still inhabit my dreams and memories. They were friends of Charles and he was learning to listen to them. I recall the stories of Jane Goodall and Diane Fossey when I think of him because he, too, developed passion and a genuine caring for the future of the elephants. I can't help but think that if we learn to hear what the elephants are saying, we will learn to

interact with the land that we inhabit, not just *act on it,* and *against* so many of the species that we supposedly share it with.

But then I can't help but wonder if it is at all possible to learn their language, when we humans are losing our own. David Orr, a proponent of environmental literacy and a pioneer in ecological design, points out that Americans are slipping from a vocabulary of 25,000 words to 10,000 words and that globally, by the year 2100 only 150 of the 5,000 languages now spoken are expected to survive. What is happening to the Elephants is happening to everyone. We have stolen their history and our own. As cultures conquer other cultures and silence their stories, as oral histories are lost to future generations embedded in concrete and computers, our language dwindles. Our ability to adequately express our thoughts and feelings is becoming lost.

I remember a phone conversation with a friend after he quit his fifth job in a year. I asked him why and he said, "Because I didn't want to put up with their shit, it wasn't worth my time." When asked what their shit was, he responded, "just a bunch of crap, " and I thought, "Well, I am glad we cleared that up." I know that communication impairment is not unusual, and I don't consider my friends unintelligent. I often find myself struggling to find the right words, kicking myself because I don't have an extensive or sufficient vocabulary, hesitating and apprehensive when it comes time to express something that is truly important and significant in my life.

Orr says, "Language reflects the range and depth of our experience, but our experience of the world is being impoverished to the extent that it is rendered artificial and prepackaged. We've become a nation of television users and Internet browsers, and it shows in the way we talk and what we talk about. More and more we speak as if we are

voyeurs furtively peeking in on life, not active participants, moral agents, or engaged citizens." We are losing our language to technology: emails, film, Internet, and television. Dialogue is influenced by the full sensual, intellectual and spiritual experience. Eliminate one of these aspects and suddenly, there is less to say, or it is harder to say it. The video game generation has little tactile contact with the world. Words begin to carry less weight and lose significance. Take the phrase, "I love you," as an example. Humans have struggled with the nature and definition of love throughout the ages. Yet those three words often become markers of distinct moments in our relationships and they are arrived at through a melding of interactions, emotions, conversations and intimacy both physical and mental. Would you feel closer to understanding love if you read those words on a screen from a person that you knew only through that screen? Or would you *know* love if you heard it spoken against your collarbone, the breath and smell of your lover staying in your memory to resurface each time you hear those words again?

I walk past an elementary school on my way downtown. During recess, the playground is swarming with children. It is an unusually warm December day and a little girl has taken off her pink puffy hooded winter coat and tossed it on the brown grass. She throws her arms up above her head and bends her left knee simultaneously. Within seconds, she is turning cartwheels across the schoolyard, her friends counting, "**ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE**," with each turn she makes. When she finishes, she stands and rubs the grass from her hands before smearing the remaining dirt all over her jeans.

This is the only place and time that I consistently see children outside. Walking through the neighborhoods in the afternoons, I may see a couple of kids on bikes but I never see the herds of them that I remember from my own childhood days. Many of them are behind the closed doors and dark windows, staring up at a wide screen television or surfing the internet, where the only information their hands can send to their brains is where to find the letter "t" on the keyboard.

I don't deny that all of this technology has its advantages. I use email. I search the web for information. On occasion, the only way I wish to spend my evening is by plopping down in front of the TV and putting in a movie. But if I sit too long in front of the computer, I begin to feel like I am missing something. I become restless and feel the urge to get outside and *touch* the world around me.

In Vermont, during the summers of my childhood, my mother ushered us out the door after breakfast each day and expected that we would be dirty enough for a bath by evening. It wasn't that she didn't want us messing up the house (well, not entirely) but that she knew how much more we could do around the neighborhood. We were part of a pack of children that had amazing discoveries to make each day.

We caught frogs and fish from the pond in the back field, built castles and tree forts, watched nightfall with the flicker and puff of lighting bug waltzes. GREEN, yellow, YELLOW, GREEN, yellow, green, GREEN. And then the symphony of frogs and crickets began. This is what makes my history. For many children today, their history is being made in some kind of plastic box that has no smell, or texture. The only kind of dirt they get on their hands is the oil from the bag of potato chips that came from some place far away. They don't know what it feels like to plunge their hand into the

cold damp soil, squeezing clumps between their palm and feeling them crumble. Searching, breaking the earth apart from the leafy green overturned plant until it does not yield to their probing fingers. Pulling their arm out of the ground because it is now wrist deep and they want to bring the treasure into the light. Rub the clumps of soil from it; trace the knobs and wrinkles of its firm skin. Potato, pomme de terre: the world rests in their hands, discovered, revealed for just a moment.

* *

An elephant traces the branches of an acacia tree, seeking the tender green leaves; she grabs them with the end of her trunk and tucks them into her mouth. As the season progresses and the rain refuses to come, a male rams his tusk into the flesh of the baobob and tears the fiber out, so that he may chew on it and quench his thirst. Ancient baobobs stand like jolly kings, with holes torn in their bellies, all the richness of the world spilled out on the sand. Children climb inside them for shelter, hungry for the knowledge of smell, touch, and feel. They listen to the baobob creak and whisper, telling the story of all that came before, great herds of wildebeest and zebra. Bull elephants with tusks so grand that it seemed they would pierce the sky. Leopards that appeared out of the darkness and hypnotized their prey with the slow twitch of their tails.

I come home from a hike and have twenty minutes before I need to be at work. I sit down in front of the computer and send my mother an email, telling her about the grand revelation I had while staring at the bark of a ponderosa pine. I know that she will smile and for a moment I feel like we are not so far apart. I press a button and a picture of my best friend from high school pops up on the screen. She holds her day-old son in her arms, and I find myself trying to peer around the shadows of the image, in order to

see her eyes and how she has aged. I can't hear her voice. I can't see her move. Lost are the subtleties of language, the qualities that tell me how she really is doing and if she has found peace and joy in her life. I find too much room for assumption and misunderstanding when we reduce our lives to characters on a screen.

I could send her a picture of the sunset that night in Tarangire, and she could marvel at its beauty. But she wouldn't be able to feel how the pink light washed over me and softened all the edges of my life for just a moment, if she didn't see it in my face as I told the story. She couldn't possibly understand how I saw the elephants in how she held her son, cradled against her breast and belly, not so differently from the way a calf leaned into her mother as the night fell, speaking the undeniable language of blood and security.

When we headed back to camp that night, I looked back on the deep color of the sky and the shadows of the animals against it, a distinct and naked horizon containing all the language of that world in one perfect vision. I understood a moment's reality, once and perfectly. The wind whipped through my ears, and I gave in to the notion that I could be happy in that place for the rest of my life.

With a damaged language, these stories lose significance. They no longer teach us, so that we may choose a better future. Stories contain our history, where we have come from, and without that knowledge we cannot see clearly where to go. We may come to a standstill, like the elephants of Tarangire, staying in a safe space, because that is all they know and have left. Safe spaces. The elephants won't leave those safe spaces, because they are afraid to witness the murders of the ones they love. Their stories die with their mothers and they are left with nothing but fear, a fear of being hunted that rules them.

Technology creates the illusion of safe space. In a way, it is another method of protecting *us* from heartbreak and fear. We can write to strangers and share our deepest secrets. If they decide they don't like us, oh well, we never have to see them face to face. If we are angry with a coworker, we can send them an abrupt email, with sentences that may be on the edge of meanness, but perhaps not quite. They will never know, because they can't hear *how* we say it or the expression on our faces when we say it. Ambiguity allows room for misinterpretation and displacement of responsibility. The less personal, the less risky. Fewer words, fewer risks. And still, we are devouring our niche, like the elephants of Tarangire.

Love and intimacy has taught me a language that applies to every aspect of my life. Those uncertain spaces of the emotional landscape have forced me to find a way to speak, reminded me to listen. Navigating a conversation with a loved one or lover demands subtlety, introspection, and focus. Each sense is engaged, each word carries weight. Yet even the value of intimacy and responsibility has become skewed, disjointed and misunderstood as we all seek ways to become rooted again, to tell our stories and speak our truths. Broken relationships, unplanned or unwanted births, and ruthless killings are all symptomatic of our society's loss of history, our stories, and our language.

In recent years, this is the story that I hear often: Two people meet and begin having sex before they know each other's middle name. Eventually, they become pregnant by accident. They decide to have the child. Then they decide that they better get married. All along they seem rather nonchalant about their decisions, until they can't afford the medical bills, or they realize they don't want to be together for the rest of their lives. Yet now they will always be tied to each other, with the life that they created

together. Next we watch the relationships strain and break and another child is left with less than the best options in life, less than the healthiest choices to thrive and live a meaningful life.

In our overpopulated world, so many, it seems, treat children as if they are a notion, not a life. The idea of a child is crammed into the here and now, fulfilling immediate needs or desires, like the possibility of rescuing a relationship, or having something beautiful that is all your own. Thinking long-term is not a factor much of the time. Quick, appealing ideas bring more "fun and cute" into our lives and fill the gaps in our histories for a little while, until the puppy continues to pee on the carpet or the fancy sports car starts to fall apart. By having babies in such a way, perhaps we are grasping at our instinctual, primal compulsions in order to maintain some kind of wildness, to reclaim some kind of language. The trouble is, we are running out of room on this earth. The elephants are telling us this by their sheer attempts to survive. And still we living on the surface, not delving into ourselves enough to find out what really works for us and how we can truly understand each other enough to take on the responsibility of another life together. Not turning our ears inward to where the vibration and hum of the elephant song is rattling our bones.

The gestation period for elephants is 22 months. They carry their young for *almost two years.* All that time, the calf is growing and hearing a muffled version of the outside world. She learns the motion of her mother's body and feels the language that her mother speaks. She knows her mother when she is born. If human babies were carried for two years, would they learn to hear the elephants in their mother's bones?

The speed of our world would surely slow down in some respects. I am sure I would think even more deliberately about the possibility of bearing a child.

All that the elephants have are each other and the earth. They stand in a circle, tails held in trunks; calves huddled together, pressed against the legs of their mothers and aunts, brothers and sisters. Their heads are set low, tusks gently curving up to the vast African sky. They are an island, watching their world fall away. But still they sing. Wide ears flutter. They sway with each other. Dark, ancient, wrinkly flesh. Low murmur. Hum. Listen. Please listen.

Conclusion

I cannot conclude this thesis without extending my most genuine gratitude to Phil Condon, who provided me with the gentle but firm guidance, a consistent faith in my ability, thoughtful and considerate advice, and of course, many humorous moments of reprieve. To Roger Dunsmore I am also sincerely thankful, for so carefully considering my work at a less than ideal time, for sharing your knowledge and honesty, and also your faith. To Heather Bruce, I appreciate the input and effort, as well as a much needed perspective.

As a writer, I don't consider it out of the ordinary for me to look at any of my work and consider it unfinished. For many of us, no piece of writing is ever truly finished. There are too many questions to explore, too many details to embrace and endless points of view to address. Tangled Landscapes has been a lesson in patience, perseverance, discipline and humility. Each essay, poem or vignette is in a different stage of creative evolution. Some, I will attempt to publish as they are. Some, I will continue to struggle with and most certainly expand upon. And some will stay here, untouched. Each has served its own purpose and provided its own questions. Essays like Low Murmur, Low Song, serve a broader purpose and I hope to impact people with that writing. Others, like Between Love and Earth, have served a more personal purpose that may eventually be altered and become more useful to an audience.

But what I take with me now and hope that my readers will take with them, are the questions. How do we acknowledge the wilderness within us when an attitude of separation from nature is so inherent in our language and lifestyles? How do we learn to be honest with ourselves and each other in acknowledging our faults, our fears, our needs? What are the other residents of the earth telling us? How do we tell our stories

and take responsibility for them? What can differences in gender, culture, and species tell us about how we are living in this earth? When do we begin to hear our own hearts and listen to what they are saying?

Roger Dunsmore told me that I will ask myself some of these questions for the rest of my life. That thought does not daunt me, for I take comfort in the advice of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, when he writes, "Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer." What daunts me is the thought of asking these questions alone. And perhaps that is yet another reason to write. So that others may ask themselves the same things. So that others may realize that they are not alone. So that others may begin to speak and be heard, and together, we can live our way into the answers.

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My Mother.